University of Alberta

Dreaming Herself Whole: Doris Lessing's Autobiography and Semi-autobiographical Novels

by

Sharon Teresa Dreger ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring 1998

National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-28933-8

Canada

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Dreaming Herself Whole: Doris Lessing's Autobiography and Semi-autobiographical Novels submitted by Sharon Teresa Dreger in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Nora Stovel
Prof. N. Stovel

Daphne Read
Prof. D. Read

Prof. R. Sydie

April 16, 1998

Abstract

This thesis compares Doris Lessing's and her narrator's self-presentations in Volume I of her Autobiography, *Under My Skin* (1994), and two of her semi-autobiographical novels, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), and *Landlocked* (1965). The introduction emphasizes the contractual distinction between autobiography and fiction, even as it foregrounds the strikingly similar content found in both Lessing's autobiographical and fictional works. Chapter One argues that in *Under My Skin*, Lessing constructs a public, false self (Hostess Personality) to protect her private self (the Observer) which leads to the presentation of a divided self, a division also apparent in *Landlocked*. Chapter Two considers how Lessing in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* uses a hybrid form, fictional autobiography, to analyze her "self" fictionally. Chapter Three compares Lessing's autobiographical presentation of her mother with her fictional counterparts, highlighting the mother-daughter conflict and its eventual reconciliation. The conclusion asserts that, first in fiction and then in autobiography, Lessing is able to overcome her divided self by imaginatively dreaming herself whole.

Preface

In her introductory comments to a 1991 CBC interview with Doris Lessing, broadcast in Toronto, Eleanor Wachtel describes Lessing as "one of this century's most influential and provocative writers"; Wachtel notes that Lessing is "a writer with an amazing range" who, with each new book, "extends the boundaries of fiction in a different way" (*Writers & Company*, Side A). Lessing, however, does not only write fiction. Since publishing her first novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950), she has written 39 books: 21 novels, five collections of short stories, two operas, a collection of poetry, a collection of drama, as well as nine books of non-fiction, including the first two volumes of her proposed autobiographical trilogy.[1] Clearly there are many different ways of coming at the subject of Doris Lessing's writing; therefore, I would like to give a few words of explanation about my approach in this thesis.

The following study of Lessing's autobiography and semi-autobiographical works is in no way intended to be comprehensive. Rather, it is a reading which explores the mother-daughter conflict apparent in three of her book-length works of autobiography and semi-autobiographical fiction: *Under My Skin: Volume I of My Autobiography, to 1949* (1994), *The Memoirs of a Survivor: An Attempt at Autobiography* (1974), and *Landlocked: Volume IV of The Children of Violence* (1965). The mother-daughter conflict pervades several of her works of fiction and non-fiction, many of which could also be considered semi-autobiographical, and portions of which (as I will argue, in my introduction and chapter two) could also be considered autobiography. However, the three books which I have chosen to focus on have lacked critical attention, at least when compared to other Lessing books, such as *The Golden Notebook* (1962).

---

[1] Many of Doris Lessing's collections of short stories and some of Lessing's non-fictional works have been reissued under different names and in different compilations; however this total (39) includes only each original book-length work, published between 1950 and 1997.

My understanding of autobiography as a genre, its purpose, and the way in which it is considered in this thesis have been influenced, in part, by the writing and beliefs of Helen Buss, specialist in autobiographical literature and professor at The University of Calgary, whom I first met as an undergraduate. Important to Buss's theory, first of all, is the differentiation of autobiography from fiction based on the more intimate relationship between writer and reader which leads to an empowered reader; and secondly, her emphasis on the therapeutic purpose behind autobiographical writing (Buss 5-6, 14). These are the two main ideas of hers to which I subscribe and use in this thesis with regard to Lessing's writing. I feel that my use of Buss's autobiographical theory, which is feminist and revisionary, complements my use of a more traditional theorist of autobiography, Philippe Lejeune.

I find Philippe Lejeune useful, however, as a starting point for my study of Lessing because he clearly describes the autobiographical pact and the genre of autobiography, as a contractual genre based on identity (identicalness)[2] between the author, narrator, and protagonist. By contrast, he shows how, in the related genre of autobiographical fiction, the striking similarities between author, narrator, and protagonist (which Lejeune calls resemblances) require the reader "to go back to an impossible world-beyond-the-text" (21). I find this differentiation between contract-based identity and content-based resemblance a useful starting point for discriminating between autobiography and fiction.

---

[2] See Philippe Lejeune's *On Autobiography*, in particular, Chapter 1, "The Autobiographical Pact." (3-30)

Lejeune's definitions, however, like all definitions are reductive, and have their limitations; nonetheless, Lejeune is useful to my project, providing I bear in mind his limited perspective. Firstly, all of the examples which he gives are male-authored and were written in Europe in, largely, the nineteenth and early- to mid- twentieth century. Secondly, his definition of autobiography,[3] both in his choice of gendered pronouns and his restriction of autobiography to the form of "prose narrative," shows that his understanding of autobiography is a very traditional one. Also problematic is the assumption that underlies his implied statement that an "individual" can narrate "*the story* of his personality" (emphasis added); his diction shows that he unquestioningly subscribes to the idea of "the universal subject," as a "'fixed, extralinguistic' entity consciously pursuing its unique destiny" (Miller qtd. in Smith 5). Betty Bergland redefines the meaning of the "speaking subject" of autobiography in more contemporary terms as "a dynamic subject that changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses" (134).

Although I focus on Doris Lessing and her fictional counter parts as "dynamic subject[s] that change over time," my study of Lessing is intended to be more psychological than sociological: it focuses on her development of the "self," and the effects on her psyche of the relationship she experienced with her mother, as evidenced in her autobiography and semi-autobiographical fiction, rather than focusing on the historical and social determinants which also contributed to the formation of her "self." In fact, the three primary texts which I have selected *Landlocked: Volume IV of The Children of Violence*, *The Memoirs of a Survivor: An Attempt at Autobiography*, and *Under My Skin: Volume I of My Autobiography, to 1949* were chosen, in part, because they correspond to different stages in Lessing's writing: *Landlocked* (1965) is written while Lessing is still a young-woman (also featuring a protagonist who is under thirty); *The Memoirs* (1974) is written from Lessing's perspective as she approaches the age of fifty (the narrator of *The Memoirs* is also a middle-aged woman); and *Under My Skin* (1994) is written, retrospectively, when Lessing is in her late seventies. Moreover, the three books, with their variant styles and tones, also reflect different stages of the reconciliatory process, a process which this thesis argues Lessing goes through with her mother: the attitude towards her mother as expressed in her writing moves from rebellion to anger, and, then finally, to empathy and forgiveness.

---

[3] Lejeune defines autobiography as: "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (Lejeune 4).

Because Lessing's conflicted relationship with her mother, as I will argue, also manifests itself in a divided self which Lessing manages to unify by imaginatively resolving her conflict with her mother decades after her mother's death, there is one more theorist whom I have found particularly useful to my thesis. R. D. Laing, whose work Lessing shows familiarity with,[4] published a study called "The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness" (1959).

---

[4] See Marian Vlastos remarks in footnote 3 of "Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Psychopolitics and Prophecy": "In a talk at the New School for Social Research (27 Sept. 1973), Lessing refers to Laing as "a peg" . . . "a key authority figure" . . . mak[ing] clear her awareness of Laing's importance but—somewhat unfairly and erroneously (at least for his position in the U.S.)—seems to represent him as influential primarily among academics" (257).

Marion Vlastos argues convincingly for the necessity of studying Lessing and Laing alongside each other (246); "Not only in her emphasis on madness but also in her very articulation of its value [Lessing] shows a striking similarity to the views of R. D. Laing, unorthodox psychiatrist and cultural theoretician" (246). She continues, "Separately but simultaneously, Lessing and Laing are evolving a solution on the other side of the fence from Orwell [the Marxist approach to social injustice]" (246). Politically disillusioned, in the early 1960s, Lessing begins to explore the idea of "madness as potential salvation for the contemporary world" (246). Lessing, in the CBC interview, acknowledges that her idea of madness "as a way of achieving wholeness . . . is not a new idea." Although she does not credit Laing in the interview, she mentions "that idea was floating around in the 50s," (*Writers & Company*, Side B) which is when Laing first started publishing his controversial studies.

Vlastos argues that Lessing and Laing share the view of "insanity," and, in particular, schizophrenia, "as an intensification of the divisions within the normal self" (247), an idea which I find useful to my exploration in Chapter I of Lessing's and her narrators' "false-self systems" (Laing's terminology) or divided selves, as evidenced in *Landlocked*, *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, and *Under My Skin*.

Furthermore, since "both [Lessing and Laing] are convinced that the only hope for securing our future lies in the individual's journey '*back* and *in*' to his self" (Vlastos 257), my hope is that my consideration of the extent to which Lessing's self-presentation follows Laing's *The Divided Self: An Existential Studyin Sanity and Madness* will be taken as an exploration of her attempts to "break through the extremely limited framework that we live inside" (Lessing, *Writers & Company*, Side B).

Table of Contents

Introduction..1

Chapter I: Hostess Personality and Its Fictional Counterpart: False-Self Systems in *Under My Skin* and *Landlocked*..24

Chapter II: Dreaming Herself Whole Through Fictional Autobiography: *The Memoirs of a Survivor: An Attempt at Autobiography*..58

Chapter III: Uncovering The Mother *Under* Lessing's *Skin*..............................85

Conclusion..115

Works Cited...120

INTRODUCTION

Since she began writing, Doris Lessing has been preoccupied (in form and in content) with names, labels, and categories, and is well aware of their limiting effects on individuals. Nonetheless, names and labels imposed by others seem impossible to escape (particularly for authors), as Lessing well knows from her "Jane Somers" experiment: *Diary of a Good Neighbor* (1983) and *If the Old Could . . .* (1984), two novels which Lessing published under the pen-name, Jane Somers, "sold poorly" and "went largely unreviewed," particularly in the U.S., until the "secret was out" (Field 48) that Doris Lessing was the "real person" behind the book. After she revealed herself as author, the two novels were reissued in a single volume, bearing her name. The subsequent success of *Diaries of Jane Somers* was, ironically, reinforced by the very publicity generated by the hoax. Lessing confirms her motivation for the experiment when an interviewer suggests that the two pseudonymous novels "represented a kind of internal exile" (Field 47); Lessing "nods" and says: "Of course, there wasn't just one motive. It's nice to get out from under one's name. I knew so much about publishing, I knew what was going to happen—I just wanted to prove to myself I was right" (47). In the preface to *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, she writes: "I wanted to be reviewed on merit, as a new writer, without the benefit of a 'name'; to get free of that cage of associations and labels that every established writer has learned to live inside" (*DJS* vii).

Yet she writes and lives in an age when publishers market books by selling the personalities responsible for them. Accordingly, it is, in part, their increased visibility (encouraged by the publishing industry's promotion of books through author-interviews, television, and high-profile book tours) which makes contemporary writers vulnerable to becoming, in Lessing's words, "pegs to hang people's fantasies on" (*UMS 14*). But, should Lessing, a well-known author, truly be surprised by the scrutiny her public persona receives and, indeed, creates? After all, "[a]n author is not a person," as Philippe Lejeune writes, clarifying the crucial distinction: "He [or she] is a person who writes and publishes. Straddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text, [the author] is the connection between the two . . ." (11). Therefore, like it or not, Lessing, as a publishing author, cannot escape a relationship between herself, her texts, and her reading public.

Moreover, Lessing frequently invites, in fact, creates a more intimate relationship (perhaps more intimate than she is comfortable with) between herself and her readers than is necessary under the traditional mantle of fiction by experimenting with hybrid genres (such as autobiographical fiction[1] and fictional autobiography[2]) which stretch the boundaries between fiction and autobiography to their elastic limit. The genre of autobiography, as Helen Buss emphasizes, posits a much more intimate relationship between author, text, and reader than does fiction. She writes:

> autobiography offers a different contract with the reader, a guarantee that the writer is taking the risk of offering a revelation of some part of her/his own personal life. Fiction writers may indeed draw on their lives for material, but they need not attest to this. Whether it be an event in

---

[1] **Autobiographical fiction** (*Landlocked*, for example) is a fictional work which is loosely based on characters or events from an author's life but retains a fictional reading contract (i.e. the author denies the reader the "guarantee" that s/he is "reve[aling] some part of her/his own personal life" [Buss 6]).

[2] **Fictional autobiography** is a fictional work which is constructed in the form of an autobiography (such as *The Memoirs of a Survivor: An Attempt at Autobiography*); the narrative may or may not resemble the life story of the author but once again the fictional reading contract applies (see above footnote for definition) rather than the autobiographical contract (i.e. the author affirms that the narrative is her/his own life story).

> personal history, a memoir of some significant other, or the tender life of dream or fantasy, the autobiography offers a portion of the vulnerability of the personal self in a gesture of public testimony in order to facilitate some communal therapeutic purpose, to effect some change, some healing, some new way of being in the world. (6)

For several decades, Lessing prefers not to "risk" the "guarantee" that she is revealing some portion of her "personal life," and, therefore, does not "facilitate" the "communal therapeutic purpose" or personal "healing" that this thesis argues her autobiography later achieves. In *Under My Skin*, Lessing writes: "I needed to sleep and dream myself whole. I was full of division. . . . [Dreams] insisted in a hundred ways that I was dangerously unhappy about the infants I had left, about my father . . .[and] about my mother . . . . (298). I believe that first in her fiction, then in her autobiography, Lessing learns to dream her formerly-divided self whole, primarily by imaginatively reconciling her life-long conflict with her mother after her mother's death, offering a creative solution to her "community" of readers of a possible way in which to "heal" a conflicted relationship (which still tormented Lessing, as evidenced by her preoccupation with mother-daughter conflicts in her fiction and autobiography, forty years after her mother's death).

In the early phase of her writing career (1950s and 1960s), she chooses to fictionalize her life and writes comfortably within the genre of the novel, where, because of its different reading contract, she "need not attest to" her sources (however closely characters and events may resemble those from her own life). Consider, for example, her five-volume novel series, *Children of Violence*, which narrates the life story of Martha Quest-Knowell-Hesse (a character loosely based on Doris Lessing, particularly in the first four volumes), following her development from adolescence to old age. A predominant theme in this novel series is the mother-daughter conflict, a relationship which Lessing seems to be trying to work through, fictionally, at this stage in her writing, with her characters Martha and Martha's mother, May Quest. Whereas Lessing's solution in the Martha Quest series is for Martha to escape her mother who dies shortly after a final confrontation in England which occurs in *The Four-Gated City* (1969), Lessing comes closer to a more redemptive solution in her cross-genre experiment, *The Memoirs of a Survivor.* At this middle phase of her writing career (1970s and 1980s), with *The Memoirs* (1974), Lessing ventures away from the clear-cut distinction of fiction and the protection it provides when she explores her conflicted relationship with her mother in this blended work of fiction and "dream autobiography" (*UMS* 29): Lessing analyzes her life through the "fictionalysis" (Daphne Marlatt's term)[3] of an anonymous first-person narrator, the narrator's younger self, Emily, and her unnamed mother, as I argue in Chapter II of this thesis. Moreover, in Chapter III, I conclude that it was, in part, through the writing of the earlier transcendent ending in *The Memoirs* that Lessing first teaches herself to imaginatively reconcile her relationship with her mother, a reconciliatory process she begins with the first volume of her autobiography *Under My Skin*, and finally achieves in the second volume *Walking in the Shade.*

After years of resistance to making herself "vulnerable" by acknowledging that she is "working out of her own life" or admitting her life as her "primary source" (as the genre of autobiography requires) (Marlatt qtd. in Buss 6), Lessing completes the first two volumes of her proposed autobiographical trilogy—*Under My Skin* (1994) and *Walking in the Shade* (1997). Even though the magnitude of this three-volume autobiographical project suggests otherwise, she claims to be writing her autobiography under duress. When asked in an interview why she has now chosen to write within the confines of the autobiographical genre, she responds: "*Only* because somebody else is writing a biography of me." (Field 47). She seems concerned with presenting a public image of herself which she, in part, can control by giving her own perspectives: "I have been involved in a small way with big events, and know how quickly accounts of them become like a cracked mirror" (*UMS* 11). Rather than risk being presented in the distorted light of someone else's point of view, Lessing prefers to "try and claim [her] own life by writing an autobiography" (*UMS* 14), presenting, if not "the truth," at least her version of what she has experienced and why. Moreover, I am suggesting in this thesis that in this stage of her life (her late seventies), Lessing has grown into an attitude towards her mother which is more empathetic and forgiving than her earlier attitudes of rebellion, dislike, and anger, which are apparent in her representation of the mothers in the earlier fictionalized versions of her life considered here, *Landlocked* and *The Memoirs*. Thus, in the 1990s, Lessing is finally ready to commit herself to the genre of autobiography, offering the reader, in Helen Buss's terms, "a gesture of public testimony" (6).

---

[3] In her article entitled "Self-Representation and Fictionalysis," Marlatt describes "fictionalysis" as: "a self-analysis that plays fictively with the primary images of one's life, a fiction that uncovers analytically that territory where fact and fiction coincide" (15).

In order to clarify the difference between autobiography and autobiographical fiction, I will explain here Philippe Lejeune's concepts of identity and resemblance and their relevance to autobiographical and fictional contracts as they pertain to Lessing's texts *Under My Skin*, *Landlocked*, and *Memoirs of a Survivor*. Secondly, I will explore the extent to which Lessing sabotages her own autobiography, perhaps as an engineered "failure," which, in turn, both comments on the nature of autobiography, and even seems to invite one to read her entire oeuvre within the autobiographical register.

First of all, it is important to make clear that despite the fictional "games" that Lessing plays within this text, particularly with points of view on herself (which will be explored in Chapter I), *Under My Skin* remains within the genre of autobiography as defined by Lejeune: "*Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality*" (4). Once the autobiographical space for *Under My Skin* is designated by Lessing's inclusion within the text (in the title and preface or body of the text) of explicit autobiographical reading contracts (as opposed to fictional contracts),[4] the reader is guaranteed of "identity" (identicalness ensured by a shared legal name) between author, narrator, and protagonist in the text. Narrative techniques may be employed which seem to problematize this identity; however, this identification, which is "all or nothing," remains intact and is to be sharply contrasted with the coincidences of resemblance. Lejeune writes:

> Identity is not resemblance.
>
> Identity is a *fact* immediately grasped—accepted or refused, at the level of enunciation; resemblance is a *relationship* subject to infinite discussions and nuances, established from the utterance.

---

[4] The autobiographical contract "guarantees the writer is taking the risk of offering a revelation of her/his own personal life" (Buss 6). The fictional contract, by contrast, does not offer this guarantee: the author is under no obligation to reveal the sources of her material, and the reader is not licensed to identify fictional characters and events with those from the author's life, however similar they may appear.

> Identity is defined starting with three terms: author, narrator, and protagonist. (21; Lejeune's emphasis)

Lejeune has explained in an earlier passage of his book that the "*publication published* relationship" is "parallel, on the level of the printed text, to the *enunciation utterance* relationship, on the level of oral communication" (29; Lejeune's emphasis). Thus, when Lejeune refers above to the "fact" of "identity" which can be "immediately grasped," he is alluding to a verifiable fact of a shared proper name between author, narrator, and protagonist, which can be proven or disproven by referring to the publication contract and the publication history of an author. Lejeune discusses and dismisses the possible "objection" to his argument proposed by the case of an author publishing a text under a pseudonym, or pen name. He writes:

> A pseudonym is a name that is different from the one found in vital statistics which a real person uses to *publish* all or part of his writings. The pseudonym is the name of an *author*. It is not exactly a false name, but a pen name, a second name, exactly like the one a religious assumes upon taking orders. To be sure, the use of a pseudonym can sometimes cover up deceptions or be imposed for reasons of discretion; but it has to do most often with isolated productions and almost never with a work being passed off as the autobiography of an *author*. . . . The pseudonym is simply a differentiation, a division of the name, which changes nothing in the identity.
>
> We must not confuse *pseudonym*, defined in this way as the name of an *author* (*noted on the cover of the book*), with the *name* attributed to a

> fictional person *within the book* (even if this person has the status of narrator and assumes the whole of the text production), because this person is himself designated as fictitious by the simple fact that he is incapable of being the *author* of the *book*. (12; Lejeune's emphasis)

As explained above, the use of a pseudonym by an author at the level of publication does not change the "identity" of the author but rather acts as a "second name," a "differentiation," or a "division," of the author's name which, moreover, is rarely used in autobiography; the rarity of the usage of pseudonyms in autobiography, I would argue, is because of the importance to the genre of the author's acknowledgement that she is openly writing out of her own life, as Marlatt and Buss earlier emphasized.

"Autobiography," writes Lejeune, "is not a guessing game: it is in fact exactly the opposite. What is . . . essential [is] what I call the *autobiographical pact*" (13). For this reason, Lejeune defines autobiography as a "*contractual* genre" which rests upon the author's guarantee of identity: "('identicalness') of the *name* (author-narrator-protagonist)" (14; Lejeune's emphasis). He continues: "The autobiographical pact is the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the *name* of the author on the cover" (14). The validity of the autobiographical contract, then, is ensured by a shared proper name in common to the author, narrator, and protagonist, which can be legally verified.

By contrast, Lejeune defines autobiographical novels as:

> all fictional texts in which the reader has reason to suspect, from the resemblances that he thinks he sees, that there is identity of author and *protagonist*, whereas the author has chosen to deny this identity, or at least

> not to affirm it. . . . It [the autobiographical novel] is defined at the level of its contents. Unlike autobiography, it involves *degrees*. (13; his emphasis)

Thus, it is confusion between context-based resemblance (as seen in Lessing's *Children of Violence* novel series, where characters and events closely parallel those found in Lessing's life) and contract-based identity (guaranteed by the author's acknowledgement of that identity) which most often leads readers to misconstrue the genre of a text.

In order to clarify the differences between Lejeune's concepts of identity and resemblance it is useful here to consider them both as they pertain to the first volume of Lessing's autobiography; the author, the narrator in *Under My Skin*, and its protagonist (her younger self) are identical, even though they may not always resemble one another.

> As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are *referential* texts. Exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to provide information about a "reality" exterior to the text, and so submit to a test of *verification*. Their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. Not "the effect of the real," but the image of the real . . . .
>
> In autobiography, it is indispensable that the referential pact be *drawn up*, and that it be *kept*; but it is not necessary that the result be on [sic] the order of strict resemblance. (Lejeune 22; his emphasis)

The resemblance, then, between the three points of the triangle—author, narrator, and protagonist—is, as Lejeune noted earlier, a "*relationship* subject to infinite discussions and nuances" (21); in the case of *Under My Skin*, Lessing borrows point-of-view techniques from fiction (such as, at times, an omniscient narrative voice which reproduces long passages of reported speech reflecting thoughts of others, and, conversely, Lessing's own observation of herself from the outside) which complicate the "image of the real" that she projects. Consequently, reference to "reality" and "resemblance [of representation] to the truth" are blurred.

Yet, despite its fictional devices, *Under My Skin* clearly is labelled autobiography and accepted as such; why? The author, the narrator, and the protagonist lack resemblance, and the "I" in the text is protean; even so, there is identity in the legal sense, and it is this identity which is the essential element in the reading contract of autobiography. To examine identity, we need to locate the autobiographical pact which is proposed in *Under My Skin*.

Although *Under My Skin* is subtitled "Volume One of My Autobiography to 1949," and a photo of "Doris Lessing aged fourteen" is placed on the inside front cover, adjacent to the title page, the initial chapter focuses more on Lessing's mother, Emily Maude McVeigh Tayler, than on Lessing herself. The body of the first chapter opens with a line of reported speech, not attributed to a speaker: " 'She was very pretty but all she cared about was horses and dancing' " (1). The reader learns by the bottom of the page that the description is not of the young girl in the photo, Lessing, nor her mother, but rather her mother's mother; the line is a "refrain" which "tinkled through my mother's tales of her childhood" (1). Lessing begins, then, three generations back and over three decades before her own birth; the first chapter proceeds to describe Emily Maude's childhood and her life—through her career as a nurse, her tragic romance with a ship's doctor, and subsequent courtship and marriage to wounded "Captain Tayler." All of these events occur prior to Lessing's own birth. "The chapter heading for my mother in this saga," acknowledges Lessing, "would be a sad one, and the older I get, the more sorrowful her life seems" (4). However, after having alluded to this nonexistent chapter heading, in a chapter which, nonetheless, tells her mother's "saga," Lessing chooses simply to number the chapters as they unfold (more or less chronologically), invoking the model of biography which she has been following in the structure and the content thus far.

The reader's expectations already, then, are subverted after this misleading beginning in which Lessing, the narrator (almost invisible, not yet born), plays only a peripheral role. In case the resemblance of the first chapter to biography distracts the reader from noticing the relative absence of the conventional author-narrator, Lessing leaps ahead in time and overtly intrudes into *Under My Skin* in chapter two, disrupting the chronology of *My Autobiography to 1949*—"In the year just finished, 1992," she writes, "I heard of five American biographers writing about me" (14). This disruption of the "retrospective narrative" continues for the duration of chapter two; moreover, this chapter stands out in *Under My Skin* as the only chapter which focuses entirely on the problems associated with self-presentation and the writing of *Under My Skin* which reads more like a preface than the body of the text. Despite her reservations about the genre of autobiography and her dislike of the public gaze, Lessing commits herself to the autobiographical contract by making a delayed entrance into her own autobiography, thereby confirming the genre its title has set up. She opens chapter two with the following paragraph:

> You cannot sit down to write about yourself without rhetorical questions of the most tedious kind demanding attention. Our old friend, the Truth is first. The truth . . . how much of it to tell, how little? It seems it is agreed this is the first problem of the self-chronicler, and obloquy lies in wait either way. (*UMS* 11; Lessing's ellipses)

Then, she continues: "there are few people left who can be hurt by what I say: I have had to leave out or change - mostly a name or two - very little" (11). And, finally she concludes chapter two, or what I am calling her "preface," with the lines: "I am trying to write this book honestly. But were I to write it aged eighty-five, how different would it be?" (17). Because the autobiographical contract suggested by the title is not enough for the reader to accept it as a legitimate reading contract,[5] this "preface" is integrated into the text to ensure the reader will not overlook it; herein lies Lessing's explicit autobiographical contract which guarantees the reader the identity between the author (Doris Lessing, whose name the cover bears), the narrator "I" (Lessing's older, detached, narrating self), and the protagonist Doris (Lessing's younger, experiencing self), however obscure this identity, at times, may seem.

Lejeune is, once again, useful here:

> The problematic of autobiography proposed here is thus not grounded on a relationship, established from the outside, between the extratextual and the text—because such a relationship could only be one of resemblance,

---

[5] *The Memoirs of a Survivor: An Attempt at Autobiography* will be examined in depth in Chapter Two; in this case, although the subtitle forms part of an autobiographical contract, the first-person narrator/protagonist is not named, leaving the identity between author, narrator, and protagonist indeterminate; in this case, despite the ambiguity, most readers assume this work is fiction even though many bookstores (including the University of Alberta's) place this text in the non-fictional biography section.

> and would prove nothing. Neither is it grounded on an internal analysis of the function of the text, of the structure, or of aspects of the published text; but upon analysis on the global level of *publication*, of the implicit or explicit contract proposed by the *author* to the *reader*, a contract which determines the mode of reading of the text and engenders the effects which, attributed to the text, seem to us to define it as autobiography. (29)

Lessing's placement of the autobiographical contract is intriguing: it is positioned unconventionally in a "preface" that lies sandwiched between an initial chapter which focuses on Lessing's mother (ending in 1919, the year of Lessing's birth), and chapter three, which begins with Lessing's earliest childhood memories. This positioning of the autobiographical contract delays the author's "guarantee" of "the mode" in which the text is to be read. Thus, the reader, temporarily, decides what genre she is dealing with based on the content and the structure of the text. Indeed, the reader can infer from the comments in the "preface," as well as the other-focused initial chapter (based more closely on the models of biography or memoir than that of autobiography)[6] that Lessing has at least considered these alternative modes.

Similarly, in the 1984 Winter and 1985 Fall issues of *Granta*, Lessing attempted two "autobiographical" articles entitled, respectively, "Autobiography (Part One): Impertinent Daughters" (1984) and "Autobiography (Part Two): My Mother's Life"

---

[6] M.H. Abrams offers the following definitions: **Biography**—"The [term biography] . . . connotes a relatively full account of a person's life, involving the attempt to set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the facts of the subject's activities and experiences"; "**Autobiography** is a biography written by the subject about himself or herself. It is to be distinguished from the **memoir**, in which the emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed . . . (Abrams 14; 15).

(1985). However, when she narrates the events of her life in "Impertinent Daughters" (Lessing's first published work clearly labelled "autobiography,"[7] in both her titles and *Granta*'s table of contents), Lessing remains peripheral, shut away, below deck, while her mother takes centre stage:

> It was a slow German boat. My mother loved the gales that sent the other passengers below, leaving her on the bridge with the captain. This, and the deck games and the fancy-dress parties, made up for her husband, who wanted only to sit and watch the sea, and for her daughter, who was being consistently impertinent, and who cut up her [mother's] evening dresses when she was forced to go to bed early . . . . ("Impertinent" 65)

The "impertinent daughters," plural, turn out to be primarily Emily Maude, and, secondly, Doris Lessing herself, the title suggesting a sororal relationship rather than one of mother and daughter. Ironically, in the second article, which is overtly titled "My Mother's Life," Emily Maude shares the limelight equally with her husband, Lessing's father, even as Doris Lessing remains even further in the background. Despite the titles "Autobiography (Part One): Impertinent Daughters" and "Autobiography (Part Two) My Mother's Life" which clearly label the articles as "autobiography," within both articles Lessing refers to the texts she is writing as "memoirs" ("Impertinent" 52; "My mother" 227). Lessing's ambivalent attitude towards the clear-cut distinctions critics and theorists typically draw between the related genres (autobiography and memoirs) is displayed in the contradictions between her generic labelling of the above two works outside and within the articles. Lessing's ambivalence also suggests to me that, at this middle stage in her writing (1970s and 1980s), she wishes to blend the two forms. This idea will be taken up more fully in Chapter II, "Dreaming Herself Whole Through Fictional Autobiography: *The Memoirs of a Survivor: An Attempt at Autobiography*," her 1974 book which redefines autobiography and memoirs by weaving them together in a fictional context.

---

[7] As early as 1957 in *Going Home*, for example, Lessing had previously attempted non-fictional works of a "personal" nature; however as Ellen Peel argues: "*Going Home* is a mostly factual account of a visit the author made in 1956 to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). The book documents the cruelties and absurdities of racism. Of all Lessing's works [as of 1989, including the two *Granta* articles] this one most closely approaches autobiographical form, but it too swerves away. . . . *Going Home* consists chiefly of political and economic description which concentrates on others' lives more than an autobiography would" (2). Moreover, *Going Home* is a compilation of several articles written for unnamed soviet newspapers who, in return, partly financed Lessing's trip to Southern Rhodesia (see *Going Home* 314-17).

Lessing organizes "Impertinent Daughters" and "My Mother's Life" by taking a comparative approach. In the first article, Lessing covertly compares herself to her mother with the title (as suggested earlier by the implicit sororal relationship), even as she overtly structures the article by contrasting an early photograph of her mother as a "large, round-faced schoolgirl" to the "lean, severe old thing, bravely looking out from a world of disappointment and frustration" ("Impertinent" 52) in a photo taken forty-five years later. In the second article "My Mother's Life," Emily Maude, the pragmatist, is contrasted with her husband, "Michael" Tayler, the dreamer. Whereas Lessing represents her father sympathetically here, although passive, she portrays her mother as a strong and resourceful but controlling woman. For example, shortly after her parents' marriage and their move to Persia from England, Lessing's mother permanently changes her first name from "Emily" (after her unfortunate mother) to "Maude," formerly her second name; moreover, she also changes her husband's name from "Alfred" (after his father) to "Michael": "She would not have Alfred for my father: a common name. And what did he think about it?" Lessing speculates in her father's voice: " 'Oh Lord, old thing, who cares? What does it matter? If it makes you happy then . . .'" ("Impertinent" 60; Lessing's ellipses). This name changing event is elided in *Under My Skin*, which portrays Lessing's mother much more sympathetically than these two earlier articles.

Significantly, these *Granta* articles, as well as the first chapter of *Under My Skin*, reveal Lessing's reluctance to focus attention on herself, showing a still lingering preference (first evidenced in *Going Home* [1957]) for "concentrat[ing] more on others' lives" (Peel 2) than on her own experiences. This apparent attraction to non-fictional genres such as biography and memoirs (which remain other-centred rather than autodiegetic[8] or author-centred) is reinforced in chapter two of *Under My Skin*, when Lessing explicitly asks, "What is better than a really good biography?" (14) Her immediate and unequivocal response, however—"Not many novels" (*UMS* 14)—disrupts this simplistic binary by inviting yet another genre into the comparison. The above citation, which overtly ranks biography above fiction, and covertly slides autobiography even lower on the generic ladder, seems an odd advertisement for a prolific writer of fiction (who has published over twenty novels in the last five decades) and is in the process of writing the first volume of an autobiographical trilogy. Is this statement, then, simply another example of Lessing's signature, verbal irony? Perhaps she is setting up a form of self-sabotage of her autobiography by undermining the genre's truth value, as, for example, when she writes, "There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth" (*UMS* 314).

---

[8] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, using Gerard Genette's terms, defines an autodiegetic narrator as one who not only takes part in the story s/he narrates, but also plays a central role in that narrative (96).

Lessing invites here both a comparison, in general, between the genres of autobiography, biography and fiction, and in particular, between *Under My Skin* and her autobiographical novels. For example, the above quotation follows the line: "This period, when the Cambridge RAF were with us, a time with its own flavour and taste, went to make up the Mashopi parts of *The Golden Notebook*, which I have just reread" (314). Thus, she invites readers to compare parts of chapter fourteen to its fictional representation in *The Golden Notebook*, suggesting that she considers the earlier fictionalized version "truer" in flavour and atmosphere.

Lejeune considers the "widespread theory" that "the novel is truer (more profound, more authentic) than the autobiography" to be a "commonplace" which has "no single author"; rather, it is repeated by authors "with [their] own voice[s]" as it suits their purposes (26). In fact, he claims, with the examples of André Gide and Françoise Mauriac (which seem to correspond closely with the example cited above from Lessing), that:

> at the very moment when in *appearance* Gide and Mauriac depreciate the autobiographical genre and glorify the novel, *in reality* . . . they designate the autobiographical space in which they want us to read the whole of their work. Far from being a condemnation of autobiography, these often quoted sentences[9] are in reality an indirect form of the autobiographical pact. Indeed they establish the nature of the ultimate truth to which their

---

[9] The "often quoted sentences," to which Lejeune here refers, are variations of the "commonplace" that fiction is truer than memoirs or autobiography; the examples he gives are Gide and Mauriac who write, respectively: "Perhaps we even come closer to the truth in the novel [than in memoirs]"(Gide qtd. in Lejeune 26); and "Only fiction [as opposed to memoirs] does not lie: it half-opens a hidden door on a man's life, through which slips, out of all control, his unknown soul" (Mauriac qtd. in Lejeune 26).

> texts aspire . . . .[W]e might say, it is as autobiography that the novel is declared the truer. (27; Lejeune's emphasis)

Thus, with Lessing's invitation to the reader to find in the Mashopi sections of *The Golden Notebook* a "better job of the truth," she is also admitting that these specific sections of *The Golden Notebook* are intended to be "referential" in that they strive to represent "the image of the real," and have "resemblance to the truth" (Lejeune 22). This allusion to *The Golden Notebook* and its "truth value" is only one example of many such allusions to her fiction that Lessing makes in *Under My Skin*. In several sections of her autobiography, she explicitly compares accounts of episodes in her life to their fictional versions. For example, she writes: "All that [Sports Club lifestyle] is in *Martha Quest*, the manners and mores of the time, and it is 'true', well, more or less - the atmosphere yes, taste, and texture and flavour, yes, but sometimes several people have been put together to make one, and of course the story has been tidied up" (*UMS* 201-02); and also, "We have reached the end of *A Proper Marriage*. Now begins *A Ripple Before the Storm* . . . of all my books it is the most directly autobiographical. If you are interested in the mechanisms of a Communist or left-wing group, there it all is"; "A *Ripple from the Storm* gives the taste, flavour, texture and smell of the time (*UMS* 267, 268).

Consequently, Lessing confirms Lejeune's idea that "it is *as autobiography* that the novel is declared the truer" (26, emphasis added). Consider the following exchange between Michele Field and Lessing in an interview given shortly before the release of *Under My Skin*. (Field had read an advance copy of the autobiography.) In an article based on that interview, Field writes, "Because so much of Lessing's fiction has the ring of real experience, *Under My Skin* is more like her other books than most novelists' autobiographies would be." Lessing responds:

> I think autobiographical *novels* are truer than autobiography, even if half the novel is untrue . . . . *Martha Quest*, which is full of made-up characters and invented situations, in fact, gives the flavor of that time [Southern Rhodesia from 1919 to 1949] much more than *Under My Skin*. I am too old now to put all that violent emotion in it. (47)

Field continues: "Sometimes it's nearly impossible to find a dividing line in Lessing's books between the imaginary and the autobiographical, but *Under My Skin* makes one realize that the autobiographical runs deeper in the fiction than is initially apparent" (47). For example, despite Lessing's previous denial in interviews that *The Golden Notebook* is autobiographical, when Field suggests that "readers may be surprised how little the 'Doris' of *Under My Skin*, dating from before 1950, resembles [Lessing's] alter egos in *The Golden Notebook*," Lessing does not dodge the implication. "Well, I was younger then, wasn't I?" she answers, teasing the question, implicitly admitting identity while denying resemblance (Field 48). However, Lessing comments directly when asked by Field, "I've made a point [in *Under My Skin*] of saying what is [autobiographical] and what isn't, and by the time I end up saying what is and what isn't, a great deal *isn't* that people thought was" (47).

But does the ambiguity in her confessions sabotage her respective autobiographical and fictional contracts? Lessing writes: "It was with *Landlocked*" (1965), post *The Golden Notebook* (1962), "that I left autobiography behind" (*UMS* 298). Yet earlier in this same chapter she has written that "I used some of this experience in

The Good Terrorist [1985] . . ." (*UMS* 276); and "For years I had wondered if I could write a book, a personal history, but told through dreams . . . . This idea of a dream autobiography became the world behind the wall in *Memoirs of a Survivor* [1974]" (*UMS* 29). These statements are not enough to authorize open season for readers trying to identify Lessing with her fictional characters in what amounts to autobiographical novels (although she does encourage the chase). Whereas in the earlier examples from *Under My Skin*, Lessing invites her readers to look for *resemblances* between specific passages of her autobiography and fiction, in other places (below, for example) she denies the *identity* of herself with her characters and, therefore, neither does she affirm her novels as autobiography nor does she sabotage her autobiography *Under My Skin*:

> We have come to *Martha Quest*, which begins about this time - and a need for explanations. Readers like to think that a story is 'true.' 'Is it autobiographical?' is the demand. Partly it is, and partly it is not, comes the author's reply, often enough in an irritated voice, because the question seems irrelevant: what she has tried to do is to take the story out of the personal into the general. 'If I had wanted to write autobiography then I would have done it, I wouldn't have written a novel.' (*UMS* 160)[10]

As the reader will recall, autobiography is "all or nothing" (Lejeune 28). The above statement, which chooses to deny the "fact" of "identity," is confirmation of the fictional pact for the *Children of Violence* series, including the novel *Landlocked*, and should be respected. By contrast, an autobiographical pact affirming identity "(identicalness of author-narrator-protagonist)" (Lejeune 14) is found within chapter two of *Under My Skin*, which "refer[s] back to" Doris Lessing "the *name* of the author on the cover" (14).

---

[10] Throughout this thesis, all of Lessing's punctuation is reproduced exactly as it appears in her texts, including single quotes within the body of the text (rather than double quotes) and capitalization which frequently occurs in the middle of sentences; also, italics are hers unless otherwise specified.

Consequently, until the autobiographical pact is included in a text, readers are not "licensed" to hunt. Ellen Cronan Rose seems to be missing this crucial point even as she tries to coerce Lessing into "conceding" to academics that they were "right" all along about identity between Lessing and her characters in her autobiographical fiction; they were not "right" because they were violating the fictional contract of the novels Lessing had written.

Rose continues:

> Why should we take chapters in *Under My Skin* as a more authentic account of Lessing's activities and comrades in Southern Rhodesia's unofficial communist Party in the 1940s than the parallel passages in *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958) or *The Golden Notebook* (1962)—especially since throughout her autobiography she frequently notes that her fictions are "truer" than this "factual" account? (11)

Rose finds "irony" in Lessing's "profound, long-standing and well-documented . . . disdain for academics" and her portrayal of herself as a "postmodern subject" in Betty Bergland's terms from "Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject: Reconstructing the 'Other'":

> Do we read at the centre of the autobiography a self, an essential individual imagined to be coherent and unified, the originator of her own meaning, or do we read a postmodern subject—a dynamic subject that

> changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses. (qtd. in Rose 11)

"All right, then," Rose writes:

> Let it be conceded to the much-despised academic that "Doris Lessing" is a "postmodern subject—a dynamic subject that changes over time, [and] is situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses"—not only in such "autobiographical" accounts as *Going Home* (1957), *In Pursuit of the English* (1960) and *African Laughter* (1992), but in novels as well. (11)

What Rose is overlooking, here and below, is the difference between content-based resemblance and contract-based identity. As explained in this introduction, identity (identicalness of author-narrator-protagonist) is only guaranteed when an author includes an autobiographical pact within her title and within her text.

> So, if all these personae are (as they both are and are not) "Doris Lessing," then what does what is now officially called "Volume One of My Autobiography" contribute to our knowledge? There is nothing new here—nothing we don't already know, that is, from Lessing's previously published "autobiographical" accounts or from critical essays and books about her . . . . (Rose 12)

The "new" something that Lessing is contributing with *Under My Skin* is the autobiographical pact. Rather than the self-sabotage of her earlier fictional contracts, Lessing includes in her autobiography limited authorization to re-read her autobiographical fiction against *Under My Skin*, noting the differences as well as similarities. (A well-designed marketing plan, I might add.)

In fact, as Field notes, "everything Lessing has written remains in print" (48). And the terms of her autobiographical contract, it would seem, will ensure that this remains the case. Thus, despite or perhaps because of Lessing's posture of "disdain" for critics, biographers, and the publishing industry, she knows how to sell books. Her postures of self-sabotage of her fictional and autobiographical contracts merely ensure a long-lasting relationship between herself, her texts, and her reading public, but a relationship based on her own terms.

CHAPTER I: Hostess Personality and Its Fictional Counterpart: False-Self Systems in *Under My Skin* and *Landlocked*

"To write openly, from one's own life seems a bit like a disease to most fiction writers," remarks Helen Buss (5). She also explains why many fiction writers are reluctant to "admit" they are writing autobiographically: "Traditionally, autobiography is considered a lesser art than fiction by those who make and break literary canons, and as many creative writers well know, to admit the autobiographical nature of one's work is, to some minds, equivalent to admitting to being an amateur" (5).

Yet, it is the very "admission," in the form of the autobiographical pact, which separates the genre of autobiography from fiction (including autobiographical fiction) because this pact "empowers the reader" to identify the author, narrator, and protagonist. As Buss writes in connection with Birk Sproxton's "autobiography of desire"[11]: "It is the admissions made in the preface that empower me to read Sproxton's 'Kate' as the writer's desire, part of the writer's creative self. This is the lovely intimacy between writer and reader that fiction denies" (15). She elaborates:

> What Life Writing[12] allows that traditional generic expressions guard against, is the empowered reader. By trusting the reader with her life, and admitting that the insights of the text are specific to one person's experience, the autobiographer empowers the reader to make her own

---

[11] See Birk Sproxton. "Kate Rice: Her Diary." *Prairie Fire* 16.3 (Life Writing Issue, Autumn 1995): 149-59.

[12] "The Modern Languages Association in the United States has now adopted the official designation, 'Life Writing,' to describe this area of scholarship [autobiography and biography]..." (Buss 5); Buss considers the term to be more inclusive than "auto/biography" as it allows for other sub-genres (memoirs, confessions, journals and letters) as well as less traditional forms such as "auto/biographical acts involved in the collection and editing of oral histories and archival accounts" (13).

> meaningful story as she reads. Fiction invites me into the life of the text, autobiography invites me to bring the text into my own life. (14)

This "intimacy" and "trust" between writer and reader are crucial to the autobiographical reading contract—"[the] guarantee that the writer is taking the risk of offering a revelation of some part of her/his own personal life" (Buss 6)—required by the genre.

Within the context of generic expectations, then, I will examine here how the inescapable naming and labelling of "autobiography" affect Doris Lessing and her self-presentation in *Under My Skin*; for the purposes of comparison, I will also consider her fictional presentation of "Martha Hesse," a character loosely based on Lessing's younger self in her much earlier semi-autobiographical novel *Landlocked*. I will show how in *Under My Skin* Lessing constructs a public, false-self system or masks (which she terms the "Hostess Personality" [20] and "Tigger") to protect her private self, which leads to the presentation of a divided self, a division which is also apparent (though to a lesser degree) in *Landlocked* between "Martha" and "Matty" Hesse. Is this "protection" necessary for Lessing because she feels threatened by the vulnerability inherent in writing "openly, from [her] own life" (Buss 5), or do the reasons for her false-self systems run deeper than generic expectations seem to justify? These are the questions this chapter will explore.

The act of "trusting a reader with her life," indeed, can be quite frightening to a fiction writer, particularly to someone like Doris Lessing who dislikes public scrutiny and is skeptical about the genre of autobiography. "Writers may protest as much as they like," Doris Lessing gripes near the beginning of *Under My Skin*, "but our lives do not belong to us" (*UMS* 14). As proven by her Jane Somers experiment (noted in my introduction), she writes and lives in an age when publishers market books by selling the personalities responsible for them. The publishing industry promotes books through author-interviews and high-profile book tours, making contemporary authors increasingly visible and, therefore, more vulnerable.

Yet, Lessing also points out that, despite her "conditional respect" for the history that she reads, she cannot help but notice how often "[w]omen . . . get dropped from memory, and then history" (12). And, in order to ensure that one of those women, herself, is kept on record in a way that "somewhere connects with the truth" (rather than as a "tissue of [another's] invention") (14), she has chosen to write her autobiography in spite of her reservations about the genre and her dislike of the public gaze.

Even so, when asked in an interview, why she decided to write her autobiography, she answers: "*Only* because somebody else is writing a biography of me. In the old days, they used to wait until you were dead" (Field 47). Lessing, indeed, is very much alive (and publishing fiction)[13] even as she releases volume one (*Under My Skin* 1994) and volume two (*Walking in the Shade* 1997) of her proposed autobiographical trilogy—an ambitious project for someone who claims to be writing autobiography under duress, in a move of "self defense."

"Why an autobiography at all?" she asks herself in *Under My Skin*. "Self-defence: biographies are being written. It is a jumpy business, as if you were walking along a flat and often tedious road in an agreeable half-dark, but you know a searchlight may be switched on at any minute" (*UMS* 14). Hence, rather than lurking in the shadow of others' discourse (which may not cast her in a light of which she approves), Lessing leaps forward to counter it with her own "true story."

---

[13] In between the first and second volumes of her autobiography, Lessing also found time to write and publish a new novel, *Love, Again* (1996).

Or does she?

Lessing begins chapter two by giving some consideration to the question of honesty and truthfulness within the context of "writ[ing] about yourself" for publication (*UMS* 11). She writes: "The truth . . . how much of it to tell, how little? . . . The older I get the more secrets I have, never to be revealed and this, I know, is a common condition of people my age" (11; Lessing's ellipses). In fact, the entire second chapter of *Under My Skin* foregrounds the subjective nature of autobiography, focusing not only on deliberately concealed "secrets" but also on the fallibility of memory itself which both serve to problematize the validity or truth value of Life Writing.

Whereas in the preceding passage Lessing suggests that she and other "people [her] age" choose to have "secrets" and intentionally conceal the "truth," below she points to the deceptive nature of memory itself. She writes:

> Ah , yes, fond lying memory, picking out the high points of everything, in this case [her first experience of leaving home] all pleasure, crystal springs, pythons, vegetable soup, the somnolence of doves, cats, luxuriously rolling under my hand . . .
>
> However, the truth compels me . . . . (*UMS* 146, Lessing's ellipses)

Lessing states here that she is "compelled" to come as close as she can to the "truth." She also implicitly rejects the model she proposed at the beginning of Chapter two of

Simone de Beauvoir, who declared in her autobiography that about some things "she had no intention of telling the truth" (paraphrased *UMS* 11), when Lessing considers the reader's perspective with her hypothetical question: "(Then why bother?—the reader must be expected to ask)" (11). Yet, at the same time, a tension remains between de Beauvoir's dismissal and Lessing's own earlier claim to have "secrets . . . never to be revealed" (11). These assertions of an author's right to conceal "some things," is Lessing's defensive response, I believe, to the vulnerability (inherent in autobiography) by which she feels threatened.

Nonetheless, she promises not to "intentionally" conceal the "truth" even as she closes chapter two (or what I consider to be her preface) with a *caveat emptor* to the reader about the relativity of truth: "I am trying to write this book honestly. But were I to write it aged eighty-five, how different would it be?" (17). Lessing elaborates on the fallibility of memory:

> Memory is a careless and lazy organ, not only a self-flattering one. And not always self-flattering. More than once I have said: 'No, I wasn't as bad as I've been thinking,' as well as discovering that I was worse.
>
> And then—and perhaps this is the worst deceiver of all—we make up our pasts. You can actually watch your mind doing it, taking a little fragment of fact and then spinning a tale out of it. No, I do not think this is only the fault of story-tellers. A parent says, 'We took you to the seaside, and you built a sandcastle, *don't you remember?*—look, here is the photo.' And at once the child builds from the words and the photograph a memory, which becomes hers. (*UMS* 13)

Lessing compares, here, a writer's setting down of her memories to a child building a "sandcastle"; not only can this be read literally in the above example, but I believe Lessing uses "building" and "sandcastles" as metaphors for the life-writing process. Her metaphors emphasize both the work involved in giving shape to the memories (molding grains of sand on a beach into turrets and draw-bridges) as well as the tenuous and impermanent nature of memories themselves (the sandcastle's shape and substance are easily washed away by a strong wave or the rising tide). Lessing suggests here that memories can be influenced by other's accounts of them and even replaced by someone else's version of the event, if reinforced.

Similarly, Annie Dillard, in an article about writing one's memoirs, warns the reader and would-be writer:

> If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid—eschew—writing a memoir. Because it is a certain way to lose them. You can't put together a memoir without cannibalizing your own life for parts. The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them.
>
> It's a matter of vividness for the writer. If you spend a couple of days writing a tricky paragraph, and if you spend a week or two laying out a scene or describing an event, you've spent more time writing about it than you did living it. The writing time is also much more intense. (55)

Lessing, however, seems less afraid as an adult of "losing" her own childhood memories by "replacing" them with "more intense" written versions, than she felt threatened as a child by the adults' "insistence" that she accept their version of events, as will be shown in the following passage. Moreover, because of her childhood fear of losing her own perception of reality, she now claims that not only is she interested in examining the validity of her memories—"the truth compels me"—but she asserts her ability to sort through "fond, lying memory" (false memory) in order to get to more reliable "real memory" (*UMS* 146):

> But there are moments, incidents, real memory, I do trust. This is partly because I spent a good part of my childhood 'fixing' moments in my mind. Clearly I had to fight to establish a reality of my own, against an insistence from the adults that I should accept theirs. . . . I am deducing this. Why else my preoccupation that went on for years: *this* is the truth, *this* is what happened, hold on to it, don't let them talk you out of it. (13-14)

Here, Lessing describes an unusual childhood. When she felt her own sense of "reality" threatened by "the adults" (primarily her parents) who "insiste[d] that [she] should accept theirs" (with which she did not always agree), she began to engage in a "fight" which she felt necessary for her survival: she insisted over and over to herself "*this* is the truth, *this* is what happened, hold on to it, don't let them talk you out of it." And it was this childhood preoccupation with "'fixing' moments in her mind," she claims, which led to her ability to separate "real memory" from "false memory."

Annie Dillard, in the passage quoted earlier, comments about the "vividness" and "intensity" of writing about a scene or an event versus living or experiencing it. Likewise, Lessing has probably spent more time "fixing moments" in her mind (*UMS* 13) "than [she has] living [them]" (Dillard 55). Perhaps the extended time Lessing has spent replaying her experience, spatially reviewing events in which she participated, as though they were scenes from a film, also leads to her tendency to observe herself as if she were an other, with "detached curiosity" (*UMS* 12). Since early childhood, she has nurtured a compliant "false self,"[14] which she calls her "Hostess personality" (who also answered to the name of "Tigger" prior to her departure from Southern Rhodesia in 1949); this "personality," Lessing explains, acts as "a protection, a shield, for [her] private self" (*UMS* 20):

> This Hostess personality, bright, helpful, attentive, receptive to what is expected, is very strong indeed. It is a protection, a shield for the private self. How useful it has been, is now, when being interviewed, photographed, a public person for public use. But behind all that friendly helpfulness was something else, the observer, and it is here I retreat to, take refuge, when I think my life will become public property and there is nothing I can do about it. *You will never get access here, you can't, this is the ultimate and inviolable privacy.* They call it loneliness, that here is this place unshareable with anyone at all, ever, but it is all we have to fall back on. Me, I, this feeling of me. The observer, never to be touched, tasted, felt, seen, by anyone else. (*UMS* 20)

Lessing describes, here, a division within herself between the "Hostess personality" (which outwardly acts and conforms to public expectations) and "the observer" (which hides "behind all that friendly helpfulness" and watches the Hostess act). It is in "[t]he observer, never to be touched, tasted, felt, seen by anyone else" that Lessing claims her private self ("Me, I, this feeling of me") "takes refuge." This division of herself into a "public personality" and "private self," one false and one true, is connected, I believe, to Lessing's earlier-cited discrimination between "false" and "true" memory; both coping mechanisms (developing a false self or "shield" to protect her private self and "fixing moments" to "establish . . . a reality of her own" against her parents' contrary assertions) are survival techniques of Lessing's which she developed early in childhood in response to feeling her identity and autonomy were always in question. In an interview with Michele Field, Lessing admits her "stressful childhood" though she is careful to draw an important distinction: "I wasn't 'abused,'" she writes. "I was emotionally disturbed, and that is a different thing altogether" (48).

---

[14] "False self" is a term which R. D. Laing uses to describe "one way of not being oneself" (6) similar to wearing a "mask" but within a system that is more complex.

In the next section of this paper, I will explore the ways in which Lessing's self-described split into the observer (her inner self, who hides behind the "shield" of the "Hostess," watching her outer self act) and the observable (the "Hostess" Personality and "Tigger") corresponds to the categories R. D. Laing sets out in his study called *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960).

As mentioned in my preface, Lessing shares views with unorthodox psychiatrist and cultural theoretician, Dr. R. D. Laing. Marion Vlastos notes, during a talk Lessing gave at the New School for Social Research (27 Sept. 1973), "Lessing . . . makes clear her awareness of Laing's importance but . . . seems to represent him as influential primarily among academics" (257). Even though Lessing certainly would not consider herself an academic, Vlastos points out various "conjunctions of their [Lessing's and Laing's] insights" (246) which she claims Lessing and Laing arrived at "separately but simultaneously" (246). First of all, she remarks that "Lessing and Laing share the view of 'insanity,' and, in particular, schizophrenia, "as an intensification of the divisions within the normal self" (247); and secondly, both Lessing and Laing see value in madness: in Lessing's words it can be "a way of achieving wholeness" (Lessing, *Writers & Company*, Side B) while Laing suggests that it can lead to "a higher state of evolution" (Laing qtd. in Vlastos 256).

Lessing's comments, in her 1991 CBC interview regarding the potential of schizophrenics to "break through the extremely limited framework that we live inside" (*Writers & Company*, Side B), show that she still maintains her hope in "securing our future" through, in Laing's terms, the individual's journey "'*back* and *in*' to his self" (Laing qtd. in Vlastos 257). Lessing continues:

> You know, we are programmed by nature to take in very little, just enough to get us by, but not much more. I mean, for example, if we had different eyes, we'd see the sun in amazing colors and much larger. We take it absolutely for granted that what we see and feel is all there is. Well, I think sometimes Schizophrenics break through this protective barrier. (*Writers & Company*, Side B)

Moreover, Vlastos points out that both Laing and Lessing believe that "the social 'values' on which the doctor's [psychiatrist's] authority rests are hostile not only to individuality, insight, and potential creativity of the schizophrenic but to the survival of the society itself" (250), views which Lessing first expresses through her portrayal of the character, Lynda Coldridge, in *The Four-Gated City* (1969). However, as Vlastos notes: "Those people who are schizophrenic or, like Martha [protagonist of *The Children of Violence* series, loosely based on Lessing], are able to achieve schizophrenic insight without losing their sanity, are in both Laing's and Lessing's terms most capable of furthering the development of humanity" (253). I believe that it is useful here to consider Lessing, like her character Martha, as one of "those people" who "are able to achieve schizophrenic insight without losing their sanity," although I hesitate to call her "normal" in Laing's sense, which he writes about later in *The Politics of Experience* (1967): "the condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man" (*Politics of Experience* 12). Rather, I see Lessing as non-conformist to society's expectations.

Dr. R. D. Laing differentiates between the "three forms of the false self": "masks worn by the 'normal' person," "the false front maintained by the hysteric," and "the false self" of the schizoid individual, according to degree and compulsiveness of the behaviour (97). Firstly, the "masks" of the "normal person" though often "virtually mechanical," do not prevent "spontaneous expressions" and do not occur with "such painful intensity" that the individual feels the need to "attack and destroy [the] alien reality within himself as though it had an almost separate (personal) existence" (95); secondly, "the hysteric characteristically dissociates himself from much that he does" and "erects as a whole way of living" the "evasion of the full personal implication of [his] actions" by "pretending to [him]self that [he] is not 'in' what [he] is doing" (95-96); finally, the false-self system of the schizoid "exists as the complement of an 'inner' self which is occupied in maintaining its identity and freedom by being unembodied, and thus never to be grasped, pinpointed, trapped, possessed. Its aim is to be a pure subject, without any objective existence" (95).

Lessing's own description of her "inner self" echoes to a certain extent Laing's description of the schizoid's false-self system: desiring to maintain its freedom from the public, her "observer identity" is presented in the preceding passage as "unembodied" and "never to be grasped, pinpointed, trapped, possessed" (Laing's terms). In Lessing's words: "*You will never get access here, you can't, this is the ultimate and inviolable privacy*. . . . Me, I, this feeling of me. The observer, never to be touched, tasted, felt, seen, by anyone else" (*UMS* 20). Granted, an author or, indeed, any public figure has a greater need to protect that inner self than others. However, Lessing not only asserts her right to protect her inner self from the public gaze, but also expresses a sense of isolation, even though she minimizes its impact on her by distancing herself from it: "They call it loneliness, that here is this place unshareable with anyone at all, ever, but it is all we have to fall back on" (20).

Similarly, Laing underscores the "aloneness and isolation" that a "schizoid" individual feels, though the schizoid experiences "aloneness and isolation" to a different "degree" and with more "compulsiveness" than does Lessing, as noted earlier. Laing writes:

> The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself 'together with' others or 'at home in' the world, but, on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation; moreover, he does not experience himself as a complete person but rather as 'split' in various

> ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves, and so on. (17)

Lessing, in the Hostess passage displays a "rent" or schism in her "relation with [her]self." Likewise, she displays a similar schism, at times, with her narrative techniques. For example, although the majority of her autobiography is narrated in the first person, apparently following the conventions of the genre, Lessing's narrator often shifts grammatical persons, mid-paragraph, from first person to third, naming the autobiographical subject ("Doris" or "Tigger" or even "the tiny girl") as if writing about different characters:

> First the tiny girl and then the baby, who always did what she did, lift a bottom off the pot and the women in the room exclaim and coo, Harry is a *good* little baba, Doris is a *good* little baba.
>
> So rewarding was this continuous daily and nightly approval, that Doris actually arrived at a formal Legation dinner party holding out a pot and announcing, 'Doddis is a *good* little baba.' I would not have paid this memory much respect if, decades later, this same Doris, having finished a novel which was to arrive at the publisher's the next day, had not dreamed she walked into the publisher's office—Jonathan Cape, as it happened—holding out a pot that contained a manuscript. Doris had been a good little girl. (*UMS* 27, Lessing's italics; underlines added for emphasis)

In the anecdote narrated above, Lessing's narrative voice alternates between third- and first-person point of view, creating a strange distancing effect even though the anecdote confesses a desperate personal need for affirmation and approval based on performance:

the experience has had an emotional impact so powerful that it returns "decades later," re-visioned into a dream. The effect of this alternation of persons is that the "I" narrator appears disguised as an "other" who can retain her "detached curiosity" (*UMS* 12) even as she exposes intimate aspects of herself; moreover, she describes the protagonist—('the tiny girl,' 'Doris,' or "Doddis) and then what appears to be yet another "she" (the older Doris who has the dream and who delivers her novel to Jonathan Cape)—as if observing "them" from the outside. Yet, at the same time the narrating self, the mature Doris, exposes herself as part of Doris Lessing and betrays her participation in interpreting the experience when she connects the two incidents and decides that their very repetition makes them important: "I would not have paid this memory much respect if, decades later, this same Doris, having finished a novel which was to arrive at the publisher's the next day, had not dreamed she walked into the publisher's office. . . " (27). The narrator, thus, has insider information, including knowledge of the protagonist's dream-life; this shared psyche provides evidence that there is identity between the narrator and the protagonist. The "I," therefore cannot be a completely separate person who observes, selects, and shapes someone else's life story from the outside, as if a historian. Rather, the "I," here, is a construct of Lessing's which I believe refers to the aspect of herself that she calls "the Hostess" which performs outward acts (such as narration), conforming to public expectations. As quoted earlier: the Hostess is the part of herself which appears "bright, helpful, attentive, receptive to what is expected" and is "very strong indeed" (*UMS* 20) even as this part of Lessing's personality carefully constructs her public image in a way that protects her "private self"; the "Hostess" ensures that the desired spin or perspective is put on Lessing's younger, experiencing self, or the aspect of that younger self which Lessing cares to present to the public to be "observed" (*UMS* 20). The "Hostess" acts, in effect, as the public relations manager who "shields" the private part of Lessing which she prefers not to share: "Me, I, this feeling of me....never to be touched, tasted, felt, seen, by anyone else" (20).

However, even as the potty-training passage displays a "rent" or schism in her "relation with [her]self," Lessing does not furnish evidence of experiencing such a split in her "relation with [her] world"; neither does she "experience" herself in "despairing aloneness and isolation." Moreover, even though at times she seems to experience a mind/body split between her inner self and the "Hostess," at other times, she experiences herself "as a complete person" and even takes delight (particularly in adolescence) in the "body" which she clearly considers her own. Lessing writes: "The other intoxication was my body. Is there any pride fiercer than a young woman's? . . . I used to stand among people, knowing my body was strong and fine, under my dress, and secretly exult, or look at a naked arm, or my hair in the mirror, and thrill with pleasure" (*UMS* 204)

Despite moments where she appears to experience herself "as a complete person," Lessing claims her right and her ability to control, to some degree, her public image (the part of her that is watched) by protecting her private self (the part of her that watches), aided by what she calls her "Hostess personality"; as previously mentioned, prior to leaving Southern Rhodesia in 1949, Lessing describes a similar false-self system which goes by the name of "Tigger" (in her autobiography) and has a fictional counter-part, "Matty" (in *The Children of Violence* series, including Volume Four: *Landlocked*).

In *Under My Skin*, writing within the genre of autobiography, yet using fictional techniques, Lessing simultaneously narrates the outside (body) and inside (mind) of the child-and-adolescent Doris and young women, Doris Wisdom and Mrs. Gottfried Lessing, all younger versions of her "self," as though they were other people, distinct from herself. Likewise, destabilizing strategies are also found in Lessing's much earlier *Landlocked*. In this novel, the narrative voice breaks down the unified self in two ways: first, by naming, and secondly, by figuratively reversing what the reader normally considers "inside" and "outside" of the self through the use of extended imagery which subverts the reader's expectations. Moreover, these motifs, as I will show, have doubles in *Under My Skin.*

The central-consciousness and main character in *Landlocked* has two Christian names—Martha and Matty—as well as a personality to go along with each name. These two names and personalities correspond, respectively, to a private self (which nurtures inner feelings and desires) and a public self (which molds itself to other's expectations), obscuring and protecting the private self:

> Martha was holding herself together—like everybody else. She was a light house of watchfulness; she was a being totally on the defensive. This was her reality[. . . .] Yet it was the 'attractive' Matty Hesse she would take now to see Maisie; and it was necessary to strengthen, to polish, to set off the attractive Matty, the shell, because above all Maisie always understood by instinct what was going on underneath everybody's false shells, and this was why Martha loved being with Maisie, but knew at the same time that she must protect herself . . . . (*LL* 20; Lessing's ellipses)

Even as the following passage from *Under My Skin* describes the personality of "Tigger," Doris Lessing's public persona to 1949, the description and the comments of the narrative voice apply equally well to the above-named Matty from *Landlocked*:

> I was the fat and bouncy Tigger [from A.A. Milne]. I remained Tigger until I left Rhodesia, for nothing would stop friends and comrades using it. Nicknames are potent ways of cutting people down to size. I was Tigger Tayler, Tigger Wisdom, then Tigger Lessing. . . . Also Comrade Tigger. This personality was expected to be brash, jokey, clumsy, and always ready to be a good sport, that is, to laugh at herself, apologize, clown, confess inability. An extrovert. In that it was the protection for the person I really was, 'Tigger' was an aspect of the Hostess. (*UMS* 89)

Similarly, in *Landlocked*, Martha and Matty Quest go through a series of surnames which correspond to Tayler, Wisdom, and Lessing: "Here she was Martha Quest—well, if you like, Martha Knowell, Martha Hesse (but she did not feel herself to be connected with any of these names)" (222). Even though I want to avoid a concrete identification between the configurations of Doris Lessing's autobiographical subject, Doris/ Tigger, with Lessing's main character from her semi-autobiographical novel series, Martha/ Matty, I believe the two sets of characters are analogous. The personalities, Tigger and Matty, function in the same way for Doris and Martha. Like the Hostess personality, they embody compliant false-self systems which outwardly act, while the detached Doris and Martha observe (and often criticize) the actions of Tigger and Matty from the safe, invisible "refuge" of the private self.

In *Landlocked*, Martha claims that "she [does] not feel herself to be connected with any of these names" (222): Martha Quest, Martha Knowell, and Martha Hesse. Lessing, too, in the preface to *Diaries of Jane Somers*, tries to explain away her "[self-]detachment" by focusing on her lack of connection with her proper name. She writes:

> And it did turn out that as Jane Somers I wrote in ways that Doris Lessing cannot. . . . Jane Somers knew nothing about a kind of dryness, like a conscience, that monitors Doris Lessing whatever she writes and in whatever style. . . . Some may think this is a detached way to write about Doris Lessing, as if I were not she: it is the name I am detached about. After all, it is the third name I've had: the first, Tayler, being my father's; the second, Wisdom (now try that one on for size!), my first husband's; and the third, my second husband's. Of course there was McVeigh, my mother's name, but am I Scots or Irish? As for Doris, it was the doctor's suggestion, he who delivered me, my mother being convinced to the last possible moment that I was a boy. (vii)

Lessing claims here that it is only her "name" that she feels "detached about"; in making this claim, she implicitly denies experiencing herself "as 'split' in various ways . . . as two or more selves" (Laing 17). Yet, the tone of this passage which describes her detachment from her name suppresses the loneliness and alienation she experienced because she perceived herself as unwanted by her mother (who was "convinced to the last possible moment that [Lessing] was a boy").

By contrast, the hurt that Lessing represses above, regarding her mother's lack of preparation and love for her, surfaces in Lessing's writing elsewhere: "Better say, and be done with it: My memories of her [my mother] are all of antagonism, and fighting, and feeling shut out; of pain because the baby born two-and-a-half years after me was so much loved when I was not" ("Impertinent" 61). Moreover, this "pain" and her feelings of being "shut out" and unloved re-surface in her description of a mescaline-induced re-birthing experience. In *Under My Skin*, Lessing writes:

> I was being born. In the 1960s this kind of 'religious' experience was common. I was giving myself 'a good birth'—in the jargon of the time. The actual birth was not only a bad one [it involved forceps which temporarily disfigured the new born Lessing ("Impertinent 61)], but made worse by how it was reported to me[15], so the storyteller [Lessing] invented a birth as the sun rose with light and warmth coming fast into the enormous lamplit room. Why not? I was born early in the morning. Then I invented a chorus of pleasure that I was a girl, for my mother had been sure I was a boy and had a boy's name ready. In this 'game' my girl's name had been planned for months, instead of given me by the doctor. (21)

She reveals here the intensity of the emotional pain she experienced over her mother's being completely unprepared to welcome her when Lessing admits that four decades after her own birth a drug-induced state unconsciously triggers a "therapeutic" re-birth (this time imagined as she would have liked the experience to have been).

---

[15] In "Impertinent Daughters," Lessing writes: "Of course I resented it all bitterly, particularly that she [my mother] did not see that it [her recounting of Lessing's birth] was likely to make me angry. How could she stand there, with her customary determined little smile, her brisk social manner, telling me that I was not wanted in the first place; that to have a girl was a disappointment that nearly did her in altogether, after that long labour" (61).

Moreover, Lessing links this experience to her recognition of the existence of "the different personalities" within her "self." She writes:

> Probably this 'good' birth was therapeutic, but it was a revelation of the different personalities at work in me I valued and value now. One had to be authentic and not invented, because it was unexpected. Before my eyes, through the whole experience that, for hours, ran a picture show of beautiful and smart clothes, fashionable clothes, as if a fashion designer inside me was being given her head. They were not on me, but on fashion models: I have never worn this kind of garment. The other person, or personality, was a sobbing child. I wept, and wept, much to the concern of my companions, but I knew it was not important, my weeping. I do not cry enough; that has always been true, and to weep without constraint was a bonus and a bliss. I could easily have cradled that poor baby and comforted her, if I had not been so fascinated by the parallel picture gallery of wonderful clothes, and by the gracious protective chat of the hostess. (*UMS* 21)

Whereas Lessing's subconscious, here, attempts to heal herself emotionally even as she expresses her pain by "weep[ing] without constraint," the self-conscious, older Lessing immediately criticizes that emotional child as soon as she steps outside of her drug-induced state. She writes in the paragraph immediately following the above passage:

> That weeping child . . . now she's a real enemy. She transmogrifies into a thousand self-pitying impostors, grabbing and sucking, and when I cut off a long clutching tentacle, at once another appears, just where I don't expect it. (*UMS* 21, Lessing's ellipses)

Not only does Lessing criticize "that weeping child," her "real enemy," but even as she describes, metaphorically, how the child splits into "a thousand self-pitying impostors, grabbing and sucking," Lessing violently turns on what, after all, is herself (figuratively at least), "cutting off" her own "long clutching tentacle[s]" which, reaching out for love and attention, stubbornly re-grow in response to Lessing's imaginary destructive actions.

Similarly, in *Landlocked* Martha expresses self-hatred and her potential for violence, showing that she too believes in her own destructiveness:

> Meanwhile from outside this scene, she [Martha] watched a pretty young woman with bare shoulders smiling at a smiling fat woman [Maisie]. Then she saw this pretty girl look down at her hand, curiously. She was Martha, looking at her hand—extraordinary; it moved by itself, not on her will, but on its own—extraordinary, extraordinary, her hand, and very ugly, with its fingers like tools or talons. (154)

Here it is interesting to note that Martha, even as she "watches" herself "from outside this scene," dissociated from "this pretty girl," does clearly identify a body part, her hand and its potential destructiveness, as her own. She continues a few pages later:

> Martha had again discovered her hand. She sat opening and shutting her hand. It was monstrously, unbelievably ugly, like a weapon. . . . The shape made by her forefinger and thumb, touching each other—it was like

> a revelation of brutality. Her hand was like a pair of pincers, the claw of a lobster, something cold and predatory. She looked at her left hand, astounded by its cruelty. Meanwhile her right was in the depths of Thomas's hand, through which she received simple messages of warm health. (158)

In the preceding four passages, two from *Under My Skin*, and the other two from *Landlocked*, Lessing and Martha display elements of a schizoid condition. When Lessing writes of her mescaline-induced re-birthing experience—"it was a revelation of the different personalities at work in me I valued and value now. One had to be authentic and not invented, because it was unexpected . . . . The other person, or personality, was a sobbing child" (*UMS* 21)—she gives evidence of experiencing herself, in Laing's terms, as "an individual the totality of whose experience is split" (17); likewise, Martha "watches" the body of herself "from outside [the] scene," dissociating herself from the "pretty girl" she sees (*LL* 154) even though, at the same time, she does identify her hand and its potential destructiveness, as her own.

Laing, once again, is useful here:

> If there is one thing the schizoid individual is likely to believe in, it is his own destructiveness. He is unable to believe that he can fill his own emptiness without reducing what there is to nothing. He regards his own love and that of others as being as destructive as hatred. To be loved threatens his self; but his love is equally dangerous to anyone else. (93)

As Laing explains here, in the schizoid condition, an individual feels both threatened by love and that her or his love is "dangerous" and "destructive" to the others on which s/he bestows it. Interestingly, the scene in which Martha experiences her left hand's potential for violence (she looks at it "astounded by its cruelty") occurs in the same scene, at the Parklands Hotel, where Martha and Thomas first "use the word love" to describe their relationship (*LL* 152). Moreover, the violent potential of her "left hand" is juxtaposed with the "messages" of "warmth" and love she is receiving from Thomas: "Meanwhile her right was in the depths of Thomas's hand, through which she received simple messages of warm health" (158).

In the mescaline passage, Lessing's hypothetical violent act of "cut[ting] off a long clutching tentacle" of "the weeping child" to whom she has just given a "therapeutic 'good' birth," also occurs juxtaposed with her potential for self love and healing: "I could easily have cradled that poor baby and comforted her" (*UMS* 21).

Thus, it seems that Lessing and Martha both display evidence of experiencing themselves as " 'split' in various ways," both "as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body" and "as two or more selves" (Laing 17); moreover, they both believe in their own destructiveness and "regard [their] own love and that of others as being as destructive as hatred" (Laing's terms 93), feelings similar to those of a schizoid individual, although, for Lessing and Martha, these feelings seem to be experienced less intensively and less compulsively than they are by the schizoid.

In addition to using names and language directly to display Martha's self-perception as a individual split into two or more personalities, evidencing at times a mind/body split, *Landlocked* also uses a second narrative strategy that displays schizoid tendencies. It is a technique by which the narrative voice figuratively reverses what the reader normally considers "inside" and "outside" of the self, through the use of extended imagery, problematizing the boundaries between inside and outside, and even perhaps between mind and body. As I will show, this method has a double in *Under My Skin.*

From the ideological perspective of "the universal subject" (Smith 5) " 'every self,' as J. Hillis Miller remarks, 'has its own sharp configuration, different from all others. Each is present to itself and to other such spiritual entities as force, as presence' " (qtd. in Smith 5). Smith elaborates on Miller's concept of the "sharp configuration" of every self: "The 'sharp configuration' to which Miller alludes suggests the unequivocal delineation of inside and outside. Separated from that which is external to it, the self as *isolato* constantly asserts its place, outside, beside, aside from other clearly configured selves" (5).

The narrative strategy which both *Landlocked* and *Under My Skin* use to destabilize Miller's "clearly configured" "self *isolato*" is to cast doubt on its "unequivocal delineation of inside and outside." This destabilization is set up by passages which explicitly talk about reversing "inside" and "outside," and then the instability is reinforced by figurative language which shows images of reversal; these strategies work together to subvert the reader's expectations regarding the boundaries between inside (psyche) and outside (appearances).

For example, in *Landlocked*, Lessing's narrative voice draws attention to the idea of reversals with its diction—"Since Thomas had left a few weeks ago, Martha's life had been turned inside out. Once her life was a day-time life, she woke to a day in which she would probably see Thomas. But now the days had lost their meaning, and it was at night that she came awake and lived" (198). Another example describes a process through which Martha takes outside events inside her consciousness in order to take away the power of the subconscious:

> Before she set out to see her father she took herself in hand, held herself quiet: the house was more than ever like a nightmare, all her most private nightmares were tangible there, and that is why she stood outside it at night, looking at it like a stranger. In this way, she focused it, targeted it, held it safe so that later, when she got home and went to bed, she would not actually dream of it because she had forced the dream into her consciousness: she had already experienced, awake, the quicksand which swallowed so easily love and the living. (*LL* 204)

In this process, which "focuses" and "targets" outside experience in order to "defuse" its potential to seep inside nightmares by consciously barring it from entrance into the subconscious, Martha breaks boundaries. She reverses the normal process of dreaming in which the subconscious (inside), rather than the conscious (outside), controls dreams.

Likewise, Lessing describes a similar process in *Under My Skin*:

> But I had rituals to avoid them [nightmares] or make them harmless. I had learned that often a nightmare has in it a germ of something everyday, a word, a sentence, a sound, a smell. If you allowed this excitatory moment—or substance to creep into your sleep unexamined, then you were helpless. But you could disarm these enemies. Every night before going to sleep I went over the incidents of the day, those that seemed to have the stuff of potential nightmares. I ran emotion-loaded incidents again and again in my head, till they seemed tame, harmless." (*UMS 119)*

The echoes between the two passages are obvious: both describe a process of reversing what is normally thought inside and outside, obscuring Miller's "unequivocal delineations of inside and outside" of the 'self.'

Furthermore, in both the autobiography and the novel, imagery is used which reinforces this blurring of boundaries between inside and outside and transposes what is normally considered exterior and interior:

> Sometimes you may see someone doing up, then redoing, a house or flat. [. . .]They are restructuring themselves, painting the walls of their psyches . . . . Similarly, an anxious young woman turns a dress inside-out and carefully inspects every seam, whips every raw edge, pipes waist seams and armholes, as if they were on the outside and not the inside. 'That ought to make it safe,' something inside her, a long way behind that bright defensive smile is muttering. 'Yes, that's in order - I hope.' Just as so long ago she dressed and undressed her teddy, ordering perfectly folded clothes in a little case. (*UMS* 230)

The "anxious young woman" Lessing describes here is herself. Yet the detached tone of this passage minimizes the fear that is veiled in the phrases: "'That ought to make it safe,' something inside her, a long way behind that bright defensive smile is muttering. 'Yes, that's in order - I hope.'" The last sentence in this passage, however, compares the intensity of her feelings of insecurity to the terror she felt in a traumatic episode which occurred when she was a young child: Lessing's mother (Emily Maude) enroute to Africa with her invalid husband, four-year-old daughter, and baby son, steps off a train in post-war Russia to buy food for her family, and she is left behind when the train prematurely departs. Lessing writes:

> I don't remember crying and being frightened, all that has gone, but not the rough feel of the dressing gown on my cheek as I sat on my father's good knee and saw the hungry faces at the window, peering in. But I was safe in his arms.
>
> A small girl sits on the train seat with her teddy and the tiny cardboard suitcase that has teddy's clothes from the case, dresses the teddy, tells it to be good and sit quietly, takes this set of clothes off the teddy, folds them, takes a third set of trousers and jacket out, puts the taken-off clothes back in the case, folded perfectly. Dresses the teddy. Over and over again, ordering the world, keeping control of the events. There, you're a good teddy, nice and clean. (*UMS* 43)

The initial narrative summary of the event, once again, minimizes the feelings of terror and insecurity of the four-year old Lessing. However, this description is juxtaposed to a scene which reveals the intensity of the experience. In the second paragraph, the scene is dramatized and reported in the third-person point of view, as though Lessing's mind had separated from her body and was hovering above herself, watching the little girl desperately fighting to keep herself safe by "ordering the world" and "keeping control of the events."

The terrified young Lessing tries to "keep control" and suppress her inner fears by concentrating her efforts on something outside herself: she "order[s her teddy's] world"; similarly, the "anxious young woman" in the passage cited earlier, sits in a hotel room hiding from the "decent, friendly, kindly women" who "had no idea how they terrified [her]" (*UMS* 230) and "turns a dress inside-out," "carefully inspect[ing] every seam" "as if they were on the outside and not the inside." This anxious young Lessing, too, engages in outwardly-focused behaviour in order to "make it [her inner world] safe" (230).

Moreover, Lessing's earlier metaphor, "painting the walls of their psyches," transposes what one usually considers interior (the psyche) and the exterior (walls: outward surfaces that one can repaint). This transposition suggests with its reversal that a person can, perhaps, "re-do" or "restructure themselves" their psyches (interiors) like "the flat," by working on external appearances.

Similarly, in *Landlocked*, Martha's body is materialized or reified by the comparison of herself to "a house with half a dozen rooms" in which "she lived":

> If she lived, precariously, in a house with half a dozen rooms, each room full of people (they being unable to leave the rooms they were in to visit the others, unable even to understand them, since they did not know the languages spoken in the other rooms) then what was she waiting for, in waiting for (as she knew she did) a man? Why, someone who would unify her elements, a man would be like a roof, or like a fire burning in the centre of the empty space. (*LL* 37)

Here, the compartmentalization of the house also describes the division of Martha; she has different elements or personalities within herself, each with needs that often conflict. These "elements" are personified as "people" who are "unable to leave the rooms" in which they live, "unable to understand" their conflicting needs. In this earlier novel, Martha experiences herself as cut off and existing in a lonely vacuum, "empty space";

she imagines that a man (who "would be like a roof, or a fire burning in the centre of [this] empty space") could "unify her elements."

In *Under My Skin*, Lessing, too, remembers this same time period, 1949, and is going through a similar experience to Martha's, "waiting" and feeling unhappy, isolated, and "full of [self-]division":

> I needed to sleep and dream myself whole. I was full of division. I might be rushing around the town day and night, the embodiment of confidence and competence, but in my far too short sleep, staircases fell apart under me as I climbed . . . . The flying dreams, so enjoyable were grounding me in anxiety, for no sooner had I risen into the air than the knowledge I was flying brought me down again. It seemed that the moment I closed my eyes, I stood over ravines and gulfs where the ancient and unforgiving lizard, almost petrified, almost dead, stared with its dust-filmed cold eye. The farm had been sold, my parents were moving into town, and the house I had been brought up in was crumbling in my sleep, demolished by white ants and borers, the thatch sliding off the old rafters to lie in dirty heaps on earth blackened by a recent bush fire. Dreams have always been my friend, full of information, full of warnings. They insisted in a hundred ways that I was dangerously unhappy . . . . (297)

Lessing, like Martha, is feeling pulled in a million different directions which lead nowhere, to "staircases that f[a]ll apart" and to gaping "ravines and gulfs," even as she waits for her "future, [her] real life, to begin"; both Lessing and Martha plan to solve their problems by isolating themselves further from their families and loved-ones, fleeing Southern Rhodesia to make new lives in England.

Laing writes:

> A firm sense of one's own autonomous identity is required in order that one may be related as one human being to another. Otherwise, any and every relationship threatens the individual with loss of identity. One form this takes can be called engulfment. . . . . Engulfment is felt as a risk in being understood (thus grasped, comprehended), in being loved, or even simply in being seen . . . .
>
> The main manoeuvre used to preserve identity under pressure from the dread of engulfment is isolation. (44)

Both Martha and Lessing apparently feel the only way to pursue the life that they want to lead (thereby preserving their identities) is to isolate themselves from their families and friends. This solution, given the above comments from Laing, suggests to me that Martha and Lessing may be afraid of "engulfment" (possibly because of fears of over-identifying with their mothers) if a relationship of love were allowed to develop. This idea will be explored fully in Chapter III: "Uncovering the Mother *Under* Lessing's *Skin.*"

Laing, continues:

> There are many images used to describe related ways in which identity is threatened, which may be mentioned here, as closely related to the dread of engulfment, e.g. being buried, being drowned, being caught and dragged down into quicksand. The image of fire recurs repeatedly. Fire

> may be the uncertain flickering of the individual's own inner aliveness. It may be a destructive alien power which will devastate him. (45)

It is worth noting that in the previous passage from *Under My Skin* describing Lessing's nightmares of self-division, her dreams contain some of the images to which Laing refers above, and, therefore, may be "closely related to the dread of engulfment." Lessing imagines standing "over ravines and gulfs" where an "ancient and unforgiving lizard" lurks, waiting to catch her and drag her down into the dust, some of which "films [the lizard's] cold eye." Secondly, she imagines the farm house she had been brought up in "crumbling in [her] sleep, demolished by white ants and borers, the thatch sliding off the old rafters to lie in dirty heaps"; although she does not say she envisions herself "sleeping" within the old house, and, therefore, about to be buried alive, the ambiguity in the sentence structure certainly allows the reader to interpret the passage this way.

Moreover, the "image of fire" occurs in both the self-division passages, cited earlier, from *Landlocked* and *Under My Skin*. As Laing writes: "Fire may be the uncertain flickering of the individual's own inner aliveness," or "It may be a destructive alien power which will devastate him" (45). Whereas Martha looks for a "man" to "unify her elements" (*LL* 37*)*, Lessing recognizes a need to "sleep and dream herself whole" (*UMS* 297). The different polarities of Laing's two interpretations of the fire image suggest to me that Martha, who longs for "a man [who] would be like a roof, or like a fire burning in the centre of [her] empty space," even as she fears love and feels the need to isolate herself, views fire in Laing's second "destructive" and negative sense, as an "alien power which will devastate [her]." The fire image in the passage from *Under My Skin*, by contrast, is more positive, indicating, perhaps Doris Lessing's recognition of the "flickering of [her] own inner aliveness" (Laing 45). Unlike Martha, Lessing's younger experiencing self trusts her own ability to "sleep and dream herself whole" (*UMS* 297). In addition, Lessing's imaginary "recent bush fire" has the beneficial side effect of purifying the land, even as it "blackens the earth"; this image suggests to me that the purification of the land by the fire will lead to re-growth which will replace the dead thatch which has "slid off the old rafters in dirty heaps," cleared so many years ago by Lessing's father. The bush will grow back to its natural state, replacing the temporary dwelling in which the Taylers had lived. Therefore, in the passage from *Under My Skin*, the fire takes on a regenerative power and suggests that Lessing, too (whose "own inner aliveness" is still "flickering"), will succeed in dreaming herself whole.

Consequently, although Lessing in childhood experienced a "*low threshold* of ontological security" (Laing 42, his italics)—her identity and autonomy were always questioned by the adults who insisted she accept their version of the truth—as an adult, "a position of primary ontological security" (42) seems to have been reached. Therefore, unlike the schizoid individual, for Lessing, "the ordinary circumstances of life do not afford a perpetual threat to [her] own existence" (Laing 42). Consequently, it is important to note that Lessing does not completely fit Laing's definition of a schizoid individual, even though at times (when she feels threatened by specific situations), she resorts to behaviour in which she dissociates her body from her mind.

Also unlike Laing's description of "the hysteric," Lessing does not "characteristically dissociate [her]self from much that she does" "as a whole way of living," nor does she "evade" "the full personal implications of [her] actions" by "pretending to [her]self that [she] is not 'in' what [she] is doing" (Laing 95-96). Rather, she behaves as a " 'normal' individual" who develops "a schizoid state" temporarily in response to perceived dangers. Laing writes:

> The 'normal' individual, in a situation all can see to be threatening to his being and to offer no real sense of escape, develops a schizoid state in trying to get outside it, if not physically, at least mentally: he becomes a mental observer, who looks on, detached and impassive, at what his body is doing or what is being done to his body. (79)

Lessing's feelings of vulnerability about losing her "identity" and "freedom" or privacy are, perhaps, increased because of the low-level of security she developed in childhood; she perceived herself as unwanted and unloved by her overbearing and cold mother who had always wanted a son and, therefore, favoured Lessing's brother, Harry. As quoted earlier, Lessing writes: "my memories of her [my mother] are all of antagonism, and fighting, and feeling shut out; of pain because the baby born two-and-a-half years after me was so much loved when I was not" ("Impertinent 61). But Lessing seems to have outgrown her insecurity with her departure to England. She gives up her false self, Tigger, with her departure to England, as her fictional counterpart, Martha, gives up Matty. However, Lessing's insecurity and reliance on a false-self system to protect her private self reappears with the "Hostess personality" in *Under My Skin*, presumably triggered by the greater degree of vulnerability caused by the autobiographical pact versus the fictional contract.

Helen Buss's clarification of the difference between autobiography and fiction, based on their reading contracts, is worth repeating here: "autobiography offers . . . a guarantee that the writer is *taking the risk* of offering a revelation of some part of her/his own personal life. Fiction writers may indeed draw on their lives for material, but they need not attest to this . . ." (6; emphasis added). Lessing's risk-taking foray into the autobiographical genre with its required "guarantee" seems to have triggered a similar defensive response to the one she resorted to in childhood and young-womanhood. "Temporary states of dissociation between the self and body," writes Laing, "usually . . . are seen as arising from an original position wherein the self began as embodied, became temporarily dissociated under stress, and returned to its original embodied position when the crisis was over" (69).

Consequently, rather than revealing a schizoid individual, Lessing's false-self system evident in *Under My Skin* (the split between the Hostess and the Observer) seems to be a temporary response to the danger or fear of being "touched, tasted, felt, seen" by an insatiable reading public. The same self-division which is apparent in the first volume of her autobiography is not displayed in Lessing's later *Walking in the Shade: Volume II of My Autobiography 1949 to 1962.* Perhaps this is because, Lessing, having grown more comfortable with the genres of Life Writing, chooses to write a less personal, less traditional autobiography, more akin to a memoir, which focuses on others more than on herself. Moreover, in *Walking in the Shade* she also rejects chronological organization in favour of geographical organization, and this new structure allows her more easily to elide events, about which she prefers to have "secrets . . . never to be revealed" (*UMS* 11).

CHAPTER II: Dreaming Herself Whole Through Fictional Autobiography: *The Memoirs Of A Survivor: An Attempt At Autobiography*

The previous chapter considered, in part, the role that Lessing's narrative techniques play in breaking down the delineations between the inside and the outside of the "self" in the first volume of Lessing's autobiography, *Under My Skin*, and in her semi-autobiographical novel, *Landlocked*. This chapter will consider *The Memoirs of a Survivor: An Attempt at Autobiography* as another interesting case concerning which one might study narrative voice in relation to autobiographical form, illuminating the ways in which form affects the narrator's presentation of the "self."

First I will describe the hybrid form of *The Memoirs of a Survivor: An Attempt at Autobiography* and show how its blended form illustrates Lessing's desire to overstep the boundaries critics and theorists draw between the two sub-genres, memoirs and autobiography; secondly, because Lessing weaves together fiction and autobiography in this narrative, I will discuss the implications of this combination on the reading contract; thirdly, I will analyze the ways in which form and narrative techniques affect the presentation of the "self" of *The Memoirs*' unnamed first-person narrator; and finally, I will offer a reading of this text which suggests its writing teaches Lessing how to analyze her life, fictionally, and ultimately leads to her ability to "dream herself whole" in her autobiography (*UMS* 297).

Even though identity (identicalness ensured by shared usage of a legal name) between the unnamed narrator, protagonist, and the author, Doris Lessing, is neither clearly established nor denied, the first part of the title *The Memoirs of a Survivor* suggests that the narrative is written in the form of a non-fictional memoir; therefore, regardless of the content of the work, the conventions of the genre are immediately invoked. "Memoir is a window into a life," writes William Zinsser (11), citing a 1986 definition of the genre that the New York Book-of-the-Month-Club he belonged to had established:

> Memoir was defined as some portion of a life. Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. A memoir writer takes us back to a moment in his or her life that was unusually vivid, such as childhood, or that was framed by war or travel or some other exceptional event. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that's not possible in autobiography. (Zinsser 11)

Zinsser's description of the genre of memoir as a "window into a life" seems particularly apt for *The Memoirs of a Survivor* since the first-person narrator in this book literally watches her younger self, Emily, acting and interacting with others in the street through the "narrow[ed] lens" of the window in her flat. Moreover, the narrative on the outside of the dissolving wall (which separates the narrator's "real" world of everyday waking life from her younger self's dream world) makes no attempt to fill in the anonymous narrator's personal history; her narrative does not "move in a dutiful line from birth to fame," but rather describes only her observations of a particular time "framed by" the "exceptional event" of "it":

> That's how I see it, see us, that time: the long room, dimly lit, with me and Hugo there, thinking of Emily across the street among crowds that shifted and ebbed and thinned and left—and behind us that other

> indefinite region, shifting and melting and changing, where walls and doors and rooms and gardens and people continually recreated themselves, like clouds. (*Memoirs* 67)

In addition, as Bernard Duyfhuizen points out, "The *Memoirs*' [*The Memoirs of a Survivor*'s] *discours* ['the story's shaping by a narrator, the story of the writing'][16] is the 'memoirs' of the unnamed narrator and to ignore the act of writing by the narrator is to misread the text" (148). It is interesting to note that Duyfhuizen encloses "memoirs" in quotation marks in the above citation. Is he merely emphasizing "memoirs" as a distinct genre? Or is he, perhaps, signalling his hesitation to clearly label the genre "memoirs"? Duyfhuizen continues on the subject:

> Moreover, Lessing increases [the] level of difficulty in the *Memoirs* by creating as the sender of the text a first person narrator who is anonymous and known to the reader only through her narration, who is writing a memoir which is the record of two planes of consciousness, and who claims to be writing a "history" . . . . (148)
>
> . . . the narrator writes: "This is a history, after all, and I hope a truthful one."[17] This overt labeling of the narrative as a "history" raises questions of genre which seriously affect the reading of *Memoirs*. Instead of "Memoirs," Lessing had first titled the novel a "Journal."[18] Both

---

[16] Tzvetan Todorov qtd. in Duyfhuizen (148) distinguishes a novel's "*discours*" from its "*histoire*," its story.

[17] Lessing qtd. in Duyfhuizen (149); taken from *The Memoirs* (94) in the Stoddart edition which I am using.

[18] See footnote 6 in Duyfhuizen (149). This information was taken from Lessing's typescripts for *The Memoirs* held at the University of Tulsa. He notes that Lessing considered fifteen alternative titles prior to her final decision.

> possibilities focus attention on the text as document, the consciously written object, but a journal signifies a degree of simultaneity between the time of the fiction and the time of narration, while the *Memoirs* is written from a retrospective point of view; it is the "survivor's" account. (149)

To complicate matters further, even as the book may at first glance resemble most closely the genre of "memoirs" (a finding reinforced by the title which Lessing did not choose lightly, see footnote 17), embedded within the document is a portion of the narrative which I will argue is more akin to the genre of "autobiography": the family history of Emily (the narrator's younger self, as Lorelei Cederstrom argues).[19] This history, or chronology, is viewed through the dissolving wall in surreal flashbacks within the personal realm. It is in regards to this part of the narrative that Lessing's subtitle, *An Attempt at Autobiography*, seems most appropriate.

M.H. Abrams offers a distinction between the related genres which I have been discussing, considering them subgenres of biography:

> **Autobiography** is a biography written by the subject about himself or herself. It is to be distinguished from **memoir**, in which the emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed, and also from the private **diary** or **journal**, which is a day-to-day record of events in a person's life, written

---

[19] Cederstrom writes: "Emily symbolizes the protagonist's [narrator's] younger personality, a repository of her youthful attitudes, an element of her development" (175), and "Emily is not a separate person . . . ." (176); Lessing confirms Cederstrom's argument in *Under My Skin:* "[In *The Memoirs*,] a middle-aged person . . . watches a young self grow up" (28).

> for personal use and pleasure, with little or no thought of publication. (15; Abrams' emphasis)

This distinction, considered alongside Huyfuizen's earlier comment about *The Memoirs*' retrospective rather than concurrent narration, makes it easy to see why Lessing discarded her earlier title, "The Journal of a Survivor": the narrator's self-reflexive comments about the construction of the narrative are evidence that she is preparing the document for an audience. As she remarks, "Perhaps I would have done better to have begun this chronicle with an attempt at a full description of 'it'" (130). The narrator also writes:

> But more of this later, when I describe 'the Ryans' in their proper place . . . Why am I postponing it? This place will do as well as another. In [sic] my wanting to postpone what has to be said for the sake of the narrative about the Ryans, no more than an extension and a reflection of the attitudes and emotions of the said authorities towards 'the Ryans'? (102; Lessing's ellipses)

While these passages furnish evidence of the narrator's deliberate shaping of her document for an outside reader, they also show that she does not feel compelled to respect chronological time; neither does she date her entries in accordance with the conventions of journal writing.

The full title finally chosen by Lessing—*The Memoirs of a Survivor: An Attempt at Autobiography*—still seems, however, to contain a contradiction, or at least to display Lessing's ambivalence concerning the clear-cut distinctions critics and theorists typically draw between the related genres. The form of this text is a blending of the two genres, memoirs and autobiography, and I believe Lessing announces in her title her intention to combine them.

Ellen Peel is useful here:

> Lessing's thoughts about autobiography are rooted in her challenge to the distinction between self and other: "It's impossible to have an experience that other people haven't had, or aren't having." . . . For Lessing, writing about the self inevitably embraces writing about the other, and the reverse is true as well. She does not reject the self in favor of the other but redefines both in such a way that her explanation of why it is impossible to write autobiographically gives equal support to the idea that is impossible *not* to write autobiographically. (6; Peel's emphasis)

Likewise, Lessing does not reject either "autobiography" or "memoir," but rather redefines both genres by weaving them together in a fictional context. She constructs a fictitious witness-narrator ("I") who observes a younger self (represented by the character of Emily, growing up) and writes about her "self" as though she were writing about an "other." The narrator's document is written in a hybrid form which borrows equally from memoirs and autobiography. The narrative is structured as a "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life,[20] in particular, the story of his personality" (Lejeune 4). However, in this case, the "real person" is a fictional construct (only loosely based on Lessing).

---

[20] As explained earlier, Emily is a younger version of the narrator's self rather than a completely separate character.

What effect, then, does this cross-genre combination of memoirs/autobiography and fiction have on the reading contract? In which "mode" should this text be read?

Understandably, there is considerable controversy amongst critics as to which genre *The Memoirs* belongs to: realism, fantasy, fable, allegory, science fiction, and inner space fiction have all been suggested.[21] About the only thing critics agree on is that *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is not to be taken seriously as autobiography.[22]

Certainly, the narrative is a curious mixture of surrealism and realism. It is set in an indeterminate time and place, somewhere in the near future, and in some unspecified large city within England.[23] Moreover, there is no explicit autobiographical or fictional contract within the text; thus, many readers may be uncertain about what type of reading contract applies.

In *Under My Skin*, written two decades after *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, the reader becomes aware of obvious resemblances between Doris Lessing and *The Memoir*'s Emily, and between Emily Maude McVeigh, Lessing's mother, and Emily's mother in *The Memoirs*. For example, parallel scenes in *The Memoirs* and *Under My Skin* are virtually identical except for the changes of name and the differences in points of view. The father's "tickling game" is dramatized in both *The Memoirs* (76) and *Under My Skin* (31). Similarly duplicated is the scene in which the young child, in front of her father, overhears her mother complaining about her to a friend (*M* 61; *UMS* 30). In both works, "Baby" is presented to his sister by their nurse, and the young girl is told that her brother is her baby (even as she is forced to accept the lie that she holds him while she knows the nurse continues to bear most of his weight) (*M* 119; *UMS* 24). Both texts also feature a scene in which the somewhat older, feverish daughter begs her mother to "Come and cuddle me, come and cuddle me" (*UMS* 125-26; *Memoirs* 80). Furthermore, descriptions of the Tehran nursery in which Lessing was raised until her family moved to Southern Rhodesia, as well as descriptions of the soldier father, the pampered baby brother, and the overworked, cold mother, are strikingly similar in the two works. However, as discussed in my introduction, these content-based resemblances do not give the reader the autobiographical license that the contract-based identity of the autobiographical pact does. Therefore, at the time of its publication, *The Memoirs* can only be considered memoir and/or autobiography in form.

---

[21] For "realism": see Ruth Whittaker and Ronald Brydon (both qtd. in Cederstrom 176); "Fantasy," "Fable," and "Allegory": see Betsy Draine (51); "Science Fiction": see Melvin Maddocks (qtd. in Cederstrom 170); "inner space fiction"; see C.J. Driver (19) and Cederstrom (170);

[22] See, for example: Cederstrom (170); Glendinning qtd. in Duyfhuizen (155); Pickering (138); and Rubenstein (*Novelistic Vision* 222; 233; 239).

[23] The city is identified as London by some critics, although it is not named. For example, Jean Pickering places the narrative within London because of references to the Fleet River and the Underground (136).

Nonetheless, in *Under My Skin* Lessing calls *The Memoirs of a Survivor* her "dream autobiography," thereby designating for the reader the autobiographical space in which the world-behind-the-wall portions can be read. Lessing writes:

> For years I had wondered if I could write a book, a personal history, but told through dreams, for I remember dreams well, and sometimes have kept note of them. . . . This idea of a dream autobiography became the world behind the wall in *Memoirs of a Survivor*. (29)

Similarly, Lessing reiterates in interviews and on speaking tours (prior to *Under My Skin* and following the publication of *The Memoirs*) that *The Memoirs* was "an attempt at autobiography," [24] as the subtitle proclaims. Most critics mention the subtitle but then dismiss it, confused by its seeming irrelevance to the "novel."[25] By contrast, Peel tries to make sense of the subtitle, calling Lessing's "stance toward autobiography" in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* "ambivalent" (4). She continues:

> Some details of [Emily's] past, as represented in the third [personal-realm-behind-the-wall]world, recall Lessing's own past, but generally the three worlds are so distanced as to make any claim of autobiographical accuracy impossible. Obviously not a literal account of Lessing's life, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is freed to have a title that alludes to something akin to autobiography. But even this work does not bear the title *The Autobiography of a Survivor*, for, as I have suggested, the narrator does not concentrate much on herself; the attention given to others by her narrative places it *somewhere between* autobiography and memoir. (4; emphasis added)

Peel concludes that "[Lessing's] astonishing classification of a book that few would even call autobiographical fiction means that we must open ourselves to a more variegated definition of autobiography" (5). This hunch of Peel's that readers need to be more open to a broader, less literal sense of "autobiography" is confirmed by Lessing five years later in *Under My Skin*:

> When I wrote *Memoirs of a Survivor* I called it, 'An Attempt at Autobiography,' but no one was interested. Foreign publishers simply left

---

[24] See, for example, Roberta Rubenstein, "An Evening at the 92nd Street Y" (6); and C.J. Driver (19).
[25] Cederstrom (170); Glendinning qtd. in Duyfhuizen (155); Pickering (138); and Rubenstein (*Novelistic Vision* 222; 233; 239).

> it off the title page, and soon no one remembered to put it on reprints in English. People seemed embarrassed. They did not understand it, they said. For thousands of years, we—humankind—have told ourselves tales and stories, and they were elusive and equivocal; they hinted and alluded, they shadowed forth in a glass darkly. But after three centuries of the Realistic Novel, in many people this part of the Brain has atrophied. (28)

Here, Lessing suggests that autobiography need not follow the model of the realistic novel, but rather can be "hinted [at]" and "alluded [to]," "shadowed forth in a glass darkly"; however, such techniques require more of the reader's imagination ("[that] part of the brain [which] has atrophied" in the eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century reader).

Lessing continues:

> To me nothing seems more simple than the plan of this novel. A middle-aged person—the sex does not matter—observes a young self grow up. A general worsening of conditions go on, as has happened in my lifetime. Waves of violence sweep past—represented by gangs of young and anarchic people—go by, and vanish. These are the wars and movements like Hitler, Mussolini, Communism, white supremacy, systems of brutal ideas that seem for a time unassailable, then collapse. Meanwhile behind a wall, other things go on. (*UMS* 28-29)

Lessing explains, here, the connections between events in her life and the apparently "futuristic" events of *The Memoirs*, modified, of course, by the "exaggeration" and "enlargement" which are, as Lessing notes in connection with *The Memoirs*, "appropriate for the world of dreams" (*UMS* 29).

Daphne Marlatt's comments on the writing of "fictionalysis" seem to support the type of non-literal autobiography which Lessing "attempted" decades earlier. Marlatt asks, "And why isn't the imaginary part of one's life story?" (15). She elaborates: "Autobiography is not separable from poetry for me on this ground i would call fictionalysis: a self-analysis that plays fictively with the primary images of one's life, a fiction that uncovers analytically that territory where fact and fiction coincide" (15)[26]. In *The Memoirs*, Lessing seems engaged in such a project of fictionalysis: analyzing herself through the use of autobiographical dream-images and using "fiction" (an invented witness-narrator) to observe her younger self as though she were another person, in order to "uncover analytically" that place "where fact and fiction coincide."

To summarize, I believe Lessing's subtitle, "An Attempt at Autobiography," combined with her statements in interviews and the autobiographical contract contained in the later work, *Under My Skin* (as quoted in the dream-autobiography passage and below), authorize an autobiographical reading of the portion of the novel which occurs behind-the-dissolving-wall (the dream-world sections) within the parameters which Lessing sets out below. She writes:

> I used the nursery in Tehran, and the characters of my parents, both *exaggerated* and *enlarged*, because this is appropriate for the world of

---

[26] Daphne Marlatt's capitalization is reproduced as it appears in the original. Marlatt uses a lower-case "i" to signify that she is refusing to construct herself as a "coherent, unified, univocal" subject which, using Jane Gallop's terms, is "well-defined and firm" (qtd. in Smith 17). For more information, see Sidonie Smith's discussion the "histories of universal subjectivity" in her section on "The Subject of Autobiography" (17-20).

> dreams. I used that aspect of my mother which she herself described as 'I have sacrificed myself for my children.' . . . She was the frustrated complaining woman I first met as my mother, but who has often appeared in my life, sometimes as a friend. (*UMS* 29; emphasis added)

Herein lies a form of the autobiographical pact which, taken together with the earlier-cited passage of Lessing's (describing *The Memoirs* as her "dream autobiography" [*UMS* 29]), provides authorization for a reading, limited to the world-behind-the-wall sections, of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* as autobiography.

In contrast to the surreal, autobiographical dream sequences, for the daytime or realistic world (or, as the first-person narrator calls them, "ordinary life" sections) there is no explicit autobiographical contract within or outside the text. Thus, this portion of the text remains ambivalent. Lessing herself seems to consider the work as a whole a "novel," as evidenced by her own labelling of the book in the earlier passage: "To me nothing seems more simple than the plan of this novel" (*UMS* 28). Because this "novel" seems to contain a different reading contract for either side of *The Memoirs'* dissolving wall—surreal and real—this text furnishes an excellent opportunity to problematize the distinctions between autobiography and fiction based on identity and resemblance, as theorized by Philippe Lejeune, and as addressed in my introduction.

Consequently, I discuss here my reading of *The Memoirs* as fictional autobiography. Because the "identity" (identicalness guaranteed by a shared proper name) between the author, the unnamed witness-narrator, and the protagonist "Emily," as discussed earlier, remains unclear (the first person narrator of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is not named in the title or within the text), by default, the fictional pact applies.

However, as shown earlier, the narrative is structured as a hybrid form of memoirs and autobiography. And, in light of Lessing's "challenge to the very distinction between self and other" [qtd. in Peel], and her statements regarding the writing of *The Memoirs* which are contained in *Under My Skin*, I believe "fictional autobiography" to be a more appropriate description of the form than "fictional memoir."

In order to consider the ways in which form affects presentation of the "self," it is first necessary to study the narrative voice of *The Memoirs* in relation to that work's fictional-autobiographic form. In *The Memoirs*, Lessing has invented an intra-homodiegetic[27] narrator (witness narrator) who participates in the story she narrates even as she makes it seem that her role in her own story is subsidiary. She minimizes the overtness of her participation by fabricating an "identity" for herself which is distinct from Emily, the character who represents the narrator's younger self. One should recall Lessing's comments regarding the "simple plan" of this "novel": "A middle-aged person . . . . observes a young self grow up" (28). This first-person narrator is unnamed throughout the narrative and signified only by the deictic,[28] personal pronoun "I," which, according to linguist Emile Benveniste, "marks the *identity* of the subject of the enunciation and of the subject of utterance" (qtd. in Lejeune 33). Lejeune then argues that "'I' is itself . . . a figure. Or at least has all the complexities of one," even as he shows how the "use of the third-person can be understood as a 'figure,' as opposed to the proper, or literal meaning of the [grammatical] third person, which is the use of the 'nonperson,' [Benveniste's terminology] in talking about the person who is neither the addressor nor the addressee of the discourse" (33). Lejeune's conclusion follows from Benveniste's proposal that "'I' is the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*" (qtd. in Lejeune 33). Lejeune points out:

---

[27] **Intradiegetic narrator:** a character-narrator of first-degree narrative or diegesis; **homodiegetic narrator:** a character who takes part in the story s/he narrates. see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (96) who uses and modifies Gerard Genette's terms.

[28] Deictic which literally means pointing is Emile Benveniste's term for the shifting between the personal pronouns I/You which occurs in the "act of enunciation" and has "real reference only in discourse" (qtd. in Lejeune 8-10).

> We are made to understand that the person we are talking about is 'the same' as the one who is speaking. This 'identity' is to be taken in its literal sense only in one single case, that of performative utterances. Everywhere else, it is a more or less approximate figure, and the 'nonperson' thus finds himself being both represented and masked by the person. (33)

This passage suggests to me that even as the fictional writer (narrator) of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* chooses first-person point of view in order to adhere to the conventions of the autobiographical genre, by also choosing to omit her proper name either in the title or in the body of the text (another autobiographical convention), she deliberately obscures or "masks" her identity (identicalness) with that of Emily (who is consistently referred to by the narrator in the third person). Therefore, the narrator's participation in her own narrative is covert. Lejeune explains this masking device (or reference to the self in the third person) which he calls "the soft pedal," as it relates to autobiographical form:

> The author talks about [her]self *as if* it were someone else who was talking about her, or as if [s]he were talking about someone else . . . .
>
> This *figure* gives contrast and tension to the text: we feel it. I feel it myself while writing, like an unnatural ellipsis of enunciation . . . . At the

> very moment when I am writing, I mold my sentences through a sort of scouring and transposition of personal discourse: I write to myself while making myself keep quiet, or more exactly, by depressing the soft pedal. All I would have to do is lift my foot in order to restore resonance. (32-33; Lejeune's emphasis).

Lessing uses a similar (though less consistent) device in *Under My Skin* by frequently shifting to the third person to refer to herself as if she were an "other" when she dramatizes scenes from her past (discussed in the previous chapter in the context of "dissociating" her mind from her body's actions). The use of this soft-pedal technique has two separate effects on the presentation of the "self" in both of these texts, one work fictional autobiography, and the other autobiography.

First of all, the participation of the narrator in her own narrative becomes less overt, increasing the narrator's "reliability," a quality which becomes more important in the non-fiction genre of autobiography than in its fictional counterpart, the autobiographical novel. Helen Buss also emphasizes that at the same time as the autobiographer increases her vulnerability (no longer hiding "under the mantle of fiction") by "offer[ing] a portion of the vulnerability of the personal self in a gesture of public testimony" (6), the reading contract of Life Writing[29] (which in effect places the reader in the role of witness) demands more trust in the narrator on the reader's part. A greater degree of "intimacy," after all, is involved in the relationship between the author/narrator and the reader: "This is the lovely intimacy between writer and reader that fiction denies" (Buss 15); Buss continues:

---

[29] "The term Life Writing has a broad purview, from the easily identifiable expressions such as memoirs, confessions, journals, and letters to auto/biographical acts involved in the collection and editing of oral histories and archival accounts" (Buss 13).

> What Life Writing allows that traditional generic expressions guard against, is the empowered reader. By trusting the reader with her life, and admitting that the insights of the text are specific to one person's experience, the autobiographer empowers the reader to make her own meaningful story as she reads. (14)

Buss might consider the narrator's covertness about her participation in the family-history narrative (by the masking of her younger self with the "soft pedal" technique) a violation of the autobiographical pact, because of the narrator's reduced vulnerability (due to her apparent invisibility). As the reader will recall from my introduction: "Autobiography offers a different contract with the reader [than fiction], a guarantee that the writer is taking the risk of offering a revelation of some part of his/her own personal life" (Buss 6). However, I believe that, rather than disempowering the reader, this covertness merely makes the empowered reader of autobiography (or fictional autobiography) work a little harder to discover the narrator's vulnerability by uncovering the identity between characters to which multiple points of view refer.

The second effect of the "soft pedal" narrative technique, as Lejeune notes, is the addition of "contrast and tension to the text: [the readers] feel it" (33); thus, the vividness of the scene is intensified and heightened. The narrator's naming of her younger self as "Emily," even as she reserves the shifter "I" for her older, more reliable narrating self, does cause an intensification of the childhood images and dream-memories, especially since the narrator and the reader (allied in the position of witness) are also joined in the act of voyeurism. At the same time, the soft-pedal technique maintains the illusion that the narrator who is constructing the "memoir" is an unbiased, uninvolved witness to the events, a necessary illusion if the reader is to accept the narrator's claim: "This is a history, after all, and I hope a truthful one" (94). The implied suggestion here is that "history" is more truthful than "fiction"; however, the reader will recall that Lessing, in *Under My Skin*, claims the exact opposite when she compares her autobiography (personal history) to her fiction: "There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth" (314). Moreover, the pretense of the narrator's objective reporting of "personal" events behind the wall, is merely a narrative device which I believe the "empowered reader" is expected to see through.

After all, the beginning of the narrative itself in *The Memoirs*—signalled by "I shall begin this account at a time before we were talking about 'it'" (9)—is preceded by two pages discussing the relativity of truth and the nature of memory. Moreover, the narrator implicates the reader with the first-person plural point of view—"We all remember that time"(7)—suggesting that the reader, also, should examine the common assumption that one can remember an event truthfully. The narrator suggests here that "real memory" requires the "meaning" that only comes from re-living the experience through comparing notes with others who shared the experience or, implicit in the retrospective form of the narrative, by re-living the experience through writing about it:

> But perhaps it wouldn't be out of place here to comment on the way we—everyone—will look back over a period in life, over a sequence of events, and find much more than they did at the time. . . . People will compare notes, as if wishing or hoping for confirmation of something the events themselves had not licensed—far from it, something they had seemed to

> exclude altogether. . . . A meaning, then; a purpose? At any rate, the past, looked back on in this frame of mind, seems steeped in a substance that had seemed foreign to it, was extraneous to the experiencing of it. Is it possible that this is the stuff of real memory? (7-8)

The "frame of mind" to which the narrator refers is the same as that required of the autobiographer or memoirist; she must hold up her life, searching for "its shape," in order to construct a narrative. Moreover, it is through this process that the narrative, the life, acquires meaning or significance for the writer, which, as the narrator suggests with her rhetorical question, is as close to the "stuff of real memory" as one can get.

Similarly, Marlatt writes:

> Autobiography has come to be called 'life-writing' which i take to mean writing for your life and as such it suggests the way in which the many small real-other-i-zations can bring the unwritten, unrecognized, ahistoric ground of a life into being as a recognizable power or agency. This happens when we put together the disparate parts of our lives and begin to see the extensiveness of that cloth of connectedness we are woven into. Then we begin, paradoxically, to weave for ourselves the cloth of our life as we want it to be. For it is the energetic imagining of all that we can enact ourselves. (17)

Here, Marlatt takes the purpose of autobiography even further than does the narrator of *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, whose primary goal seems to be to get to "the real stuff of memory." Marlatt suggests that there is a therapeutic purpose in the act of "putt[ing] together the disparate parts of our lives" (constructing a narrative) as well as in "begin[ing] to see . . . that cloth . . . we are woven into" (holding up our life, searching for 'its shape'). This knowledge then leads to "power" and "agency"; once we clearly see the shape our life has been taking (by reliving it through writing), we can act: "begin . . . to weave for ourselves the cloth of our life as we want it to be" (change the direction of our life, if we don't like its shape, for example).

The imagery that Marlatt uses in the above passage connects with the imagery in the passage in *The Memoirs* which occurs behind the wall in the six-sided room, suggesting perhaps that the narrator also is interested in changing the "design" of her life. The narrator writes:

> There was no furniture in [the six-sided room], only a rough trestle around two of the sides. On the floor was spread a carpet, but it was a carpet *without its life*; it had a design, an intricate one, but the colours had an imminent existence, a potential, no more . . . . Some people were standing about the room. At first it seemed they were doing nothing at all; they looked idle and undecided. Then one of them detached a piece of material from the jumble on the trestles, and bent to match it with the carpet—behold, the pattern answered that part of the carpet. This piece was laid exactly on the design, and *brought it to life*. (69; emphasis added)

At first, the lifeless "carpet" in this passage has only "potential design" as it lies around the room in "jumbles of material"; likewise, the unstructured and unwritten life of the autobiographer or memoirist is only mounds of raw material with potential for a story. It requires the writer's imagination and labour, which includes seeing the design of others:

Marlatt's "cloth of connectedness," the community and the roles "we are woven into" by society.

Buss, citing Marlatt, builds on her idea of the "whole cloth" of life writing:

> "It is exactly in the confluence of fiction (the self or selves that might be) and analysis (of the roles we have found ourselves in, defined in a complex socio-familial weave), it is in the confluence of the two that autobiography occurs, the self writing its way to life, whole life."
>
> It is this recognition that writing is therapy in the most profound sense, for both writer and reader, that I find is an important part of an understanding of how autobiography works differently than fiction. (6)

Buss emphasizes above the therapeutic value of life writing that Marlatt also suggests when she asserts that a person can "enact [her]self" through the "energetic imagining" (17) necessary in the writing of a good autobiography.

Similarly, Lessing, in *Under My Skin*, as the reader will recall, expresses her need to "dream herself whole" when she is unable to find the time to write:

> I needed to sleep and dream myself whole. I was full of division . . . . Dreams have always been my friend, full of information, full of warnings. They insisted in a hundred ways that I was dangerously unhappy about the infants I had left, about my father—but what was new about that? —about my mother, and because I wanted so very much to have time to write, but could not see when that would happen. (297-98)

In this passage, Lessing suggests the therapeutic role that dreams—which "have always been [her] friend"—play for her. However, here, dreams help her by negative example:

her dreams are "full of warnings" about how "dangerously unhappy" she is, showing her the "holes" in her life rather than helping her construct the "whole cloth" which will allow her to shape her own destiny.

Marlatt concludes:

> To write a whole autobiography, i mean autobiography in its largest sense of self writing life, not the life of the self the life writes its way to, the whole cloth, is to reach for what is almost unwriteable, a hole in that other sense. Yet [the significance of] autobiography until recently . . . lay in its veracity, the faithfulness with which it followed the 'life-line,' the overall narrative of its writer's life, without leaving any holes or gaps, certainly without contradiction. The 'life-line' after all represents a single line, just as the writer's representation of herself should be a true likeness—*like what?* Given the whole cloth, the truth of ourselves is ~~so~~ large it is almost impossible to write. It is full of holes, pulled threads, multiple lines, figures indistinct from ground. (16; her emphasis)

Accordingly, the autobiographical portion of *The Memoirs* (the dream-world behind the wall) does not follow the "'life-line,' the overall narrative of [Lessing's] life" faithfully; it is full of "holes" and "contradictions." Rather, Lessing "plays fictively with the primary images of her life" in order to "uncover analytically that territory where fact and fiction coincide" (Marlatt 15). Because Lessing adopts the form of fictional autobiography for *The Memoirs* and constructs a fictitious-witness narrator who explores her younger self in the third-person *as if* she were an other character, Lessing is twice-removed from the psychological blocks involved in trying to be honest about the negative effect others may have had on her developing self. Lessing comments on her reluctance to hurt other people through her representation of them in *Under My Skin*:

> Telling the truth about yourself is one thing, if you can, but what about other people? I may easily write about myself until the year I left Southern Rhodesia in 1949, because there are few people left who can be hurt by what I say; I have had to leave out or change—mostly a name or two—very little. So Volume One is being written without snags and blocks of conscience. (11)

Consequently, the addition of the modifier "*An Attempt* at Autobiography" in her subtitle, the lack of an explicit autobiographical pact within the text of *The Memoirs*, and the inclusion of an anonymous first-person narrator who masks her identity with "Emily," allow Lessing "without snags and blocks of conscience" to feel freer to portray the mother and the father in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* much more harshly (with undertones of physical and sexual abuse) than she does in *Under My Skin*. (As noted earlier, Lessing waits two decades before authorizing parts of *The Memoirs* as her "dream autobiography," finally explaining to readers the connections between the novel and her life [*UMS* 29].)

In the first volume of her autobiography Lessing's representation of her parents is more sympathetic than the narrator's representation of "Emily's" parents in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, and any hints of sexual abuse are dismissed by Lessing: "It is not tactful for a mother to whip up her fifteen-year-old daughter's dress to expose her breasts to the father, but it is hardly a crime" (*UMS* 172). It seems that because *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is only clearly autobiographical in form (since Lessing chooses not to affirm that she is "drawing on her life for material" [Buss 6] by including an autobiographical pact within the text), Lessing feels less vulnerable than she does in *Under My Skin*; by contrast, the latter work explicitly includes an autobiographical contract within the text, guaranteeing the reader of a shared identity between author, narrator, and protagonist.

In the next chapter, I will compare the ways in which different forms—autobiography, autobiographical fiction, and fictional autobiography—allow for differences in the presentation of "others," primarily the mother in each text (*Under My Skin*, *Landlocked*, and *The Memoirs of a Survivor*) because of the existence of different reader expectations for each genre. In the meantime, I will conclude this chapter with a summary of the ways in which the narrator's use of the form of fictional autobiography, and the adoption of the third-person point-of-view (soft-pedal narration technique) have affected her presentation of her "self."

As Helen Buss writes:

> Another difference between fiction and autobiography is in the balance each chooses between the authority of art and the authority of life. Although the writer of autobiography uses the devices of fiction, the writer's plot, character and setting are nevertheless linked to history more than to literature. Even when fantasy is involved in the writing of the autobiography, that fantasy life is linked to a lived life. Whereas in fiction, events, people and places may be shaped and placed to meet any goal the fiction writer chooses . . . the autobiographer must come to terms with the actualities of peoples' lives lived in a historical context. (6)

Certainly, Lessing uses "the devices of fiction" in *The Memoirs* (as, at times, in *Under My Skin*). Yet, whereas many of the events in *The Memoirs* lead critics to categorize this text as "the writing of future history"[30] or science fiction, Lessing shows that the main events or "plot" of the outside world in *The Memoirs* can be "linked to history more than to literature" (Buss 6); Lessing (cited in full earlier in this chapter) explains how the "gangs of young and anarchic people" which gather on the pavement in *The Memoirs*, then vanish, represent "wars and movements like Hitler, Mussolini, Communism, white supremacy, systems of brutal ideas that seem for a time unassailable, then collapse" (*UMS* 28-9). For example, Gerald, the idealistic young leader who sets up communal living arrangements for the children, represents the movement of communism which collapses because it still requires a hierarchic structure to maintain the system. Moreover, "Emily's" love affair with Gerald parallels Lessing's love-affair with communism: "It took me four or five years from my first falling in love with communism, or rather, ideal Communism, in 1942, to become critical enough to discuss my 'doubts' . . . . [and] a good twenty years for me to no longer feel guilty, to shake it all off" (*UMS* 397). Even though the exact passage of time in *The Memoirs* (which uses the continuous present of dreams) is difficult to discern, both "love affairs" follow the same cycle. Initially, both Lessing and Emily are infatuated; then they become exhausted because each woman finds she is doing most of the hard work, even as the men above her (in Lessing's case, her former husband Gottfried and, in Emily's, her lover Gerald) take the credit. Love is transformed into a sense of weary duty, until, like Emily, Lessing drifts out of the party (and away from Gerald/Gottfried and their causes). Given the example of Gerald, the use of the form of fictional autobiography in *The Memoirs* seems to encourage Lessing to present her life experiences allegorically; thus, she is able to write about herself less directly than the conventions of traditional autobiography dictate. Along with this indirect method of self-presentation comes a greater degree of freedom to be critical of herself and her earlier ideas. Moreover, the "soft pedal" narrative technique also contributes to this less constraining, indirect method of exploring and analyzing her self as if she were an "other," as was considered earlier in this paper. The narrator's covert, central participation in the narrative is concealed by her "autobiography in the third person,"[31] making her seem an objective, unbiased witness to the events.

---

[30] See Bernard Duyfhuizen, for example. The title of his article is "On the Writing of Future History: Beginning the Ending in Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*"; also see Cederstrom (170).

Buss also mentions (in the passage, cited earlier, on the differences between fiction and autobiography) that in autobiography, "[e]ven when fantasy is involved . . . that fantasy life is linked to a lived life"; moreover, she writes, the fantasy life cannot be "shaped and placed to meet any goal the fiction writer chooses," but rather must "come to terms with the actualities of people's lives lived in a historical context" (6). This leads us to the other side of the wall, the surreal dream-world, which as I have discussed in this chapter, is paradoxically more closely linked to autobiography than the "realistic" outside world, through Lessing's later claim that she was writing in *The Memoirs* her "dream autobiography" (*UMS* 29). Also, as mentioned earlier, there are many resemblances between the dream-scenes of *The Memoirs*' personal realm and incidents from her childhood that Lessing dramatizes in *Under My Skin*. However, the most problematic scene behind the wall for "com[ing] to terms with the actualities of [Lessing's li[fe] lived" (Buss 6) is the final scene of *The Memoirs*. In an act of transcendence, linked to Lessing's belief in Sufism by the imagery in the scene[32] (a giant egg gives birth to a new life for Emily, her parents, Hugo, Gerald, and his children on the other side of the wall), a female Presence leads the characters from "this collapsed world into another order of world altogether" (*M* 182). This scene is impossible to link to Lessing's "history" if read literally. However, the reader must bear two things in mind. First of all, the world-behind-the-wall is Lessing's "dream autobiography," which means it is a record of her dream history, not of her waking life. Even so, if Lessing actually dreamed this ending to her fictional autobiography about a young woman growing up and out of a collapsing world, this tidy ending does seem rather coincidental. Many critics consider the ending to be escapism, a *deus ex machina* ending, chosen by Lessing as a kind of utopic solution to the alternative of finding a realistic way to live in a deteriorating world.[33]

---

[31] Lejeune's term: see Chapter two of his *On Autobiography*.

However, what finally grounds this scene in "the authority of life" (Buss 6) for me is the fact that, as the presence of this retrospective *Memoir* and the name "Survivor" imply, the narrator of this fictional autobiography does remain on the realistic side of the wall in order to write and deliver her life story to the reader. "Emily, yes, but quite beyond herself, transmuted, and in another key" (*Memoirs* 182) (the character which represents the younger self of the narrator) follows the female Presence into "another" order of world altogether; by contrast, the older, narrating "I" remains in the ruins of what is left of this world (outside the surreal realm), even as she watches "the last walls

---

[32] See Shadia S. Fahim *Doris Lessing: Sufi Equilibrium and Form of the Novel* for a Sufist reading of the ending of *The Memoirs*, particularly its imagery and the portrayal of the female Presence, a Sufi figure of transcendence.

[33] See Knapp (127); Kuns (83); and Rubenstein (*Novelistic Vision* 238).

[of her dream world] dissolv[e]" (182). Consequently, she writes her "way to life, whole life" (Marlatt's phrase [15]) and becomes a "survivor," furnishing evidence that writing autobiographically can be "therapy in the most profound sense" (Buss 6). As a result of this imaginary act of transcendence, which first occurs in Lessing's surreal "dream autobiography" (*UMS* 29), as I will show in Chapter III, Lessing is later able to reconcile her divided self and her relationship with her mother, imaginatively, through the writing of her autobiography.

Consequently, I believe, this final scene can be read as a symbolic fulfillment of Lessing's need to "dream [her]self whole" (*UMS* 297); in accordance with Marlatt's idea of fictionalysis (discussed earlier), Lessing uses her "energetic imagination," to "weave for [her]sel[f] the cloth of [her] life as [she] wants it to be" (Marlatt 17). At this middle stage in her writing, however, Lessing chooses to do this by writing indirectly about herself in a blended form of autobiography and memoirs, woven together in a fictional context. Within a document that I have described as fictional-autobiography, in which Lessing neither denies nor completely admits "identity" (identicalness) between herself, the first-person narrator, and "Emily," Lessing thus "plays fictively with the primary images on [her] life" and "uncovers analytically that territory where fact and fiction coincide" (Marlatt's description of "fictionalysis" 15).

CHAPTER III: Uncovering the Mother *Under* Lessing's *Skin*

"For the critic, the question behind autobiography seems to be first of all how does the writer represent herself? For the writer it is how do you represent others?" writes Daphne Marlatt. "An interesting differential which, in either case, brings up the notion of truth and how or whether it differs from fiction" (13). In the first two chapters of my thesis, I have been considering the first question: self-presentation of Lessing's narrators in an autobiographical context. However, I will now turn my attention to Marlatt's second question (away from the critic's concerns and toward the writer's): representation of others; and, in particular, a daughter's representation of her mother.

In this final chapter, using three of Shirley Neuman's patterns of representation common in daughters autobiographies,[34] I will compare Lessing's construction of her mother, Emily Maude McVeigh Taylor, in *Under My Skin*, to the fictional representations of May Quest in *Landlocked* and of "Emily"/ the narrator's[35] unnamed mother in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*. I will be considering the ways in which fictional and non-fictional forms affect representation: how they limit or free Lessing to construct the mother's body, voice, and desires, in connection with mothering and apart from mothering. It is important to keep in mind that all three of the semi-autobiographical/ autobiographical texts considered here were published after the death of Emily Maude, theoretically freeing Lessing from "snags and blocks of conscience," according to her claim that people no longer living "can[not] be hurt by what I say" (*UMS* 11).

---

[34] See Shirley Neuman's article, " 'Your Past . . . Your Future': Autobiography and Mothers' Bodies," particularly the section on "Sons, daughters, mothers, and the reproduction of mothering in autobiographies: some patterns" (56-63).

[35] As discussed in the previous chapter, Emily represents the narrator's younger self rather than existing as a separate character, distinct from the narrator herself.

Nonetheless, Lessing's construction of her mother is still affected by Western culture's representational practices which live on, as Shirley Neuman writes, in the "psychological models, to which our culture has ceded wide explanatory power" in the process of "self-individuation" (56) (self-individuation being the primary subject of the autobiographical genre). For example, Neuman explains:

> In Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, identification with the body of its mother is what the child must first repress in order to establish its own ego boundaries, its first sense of an individuated 'self.' In this process, the mother remains Other; she never becomes a subject, that is a woman with an identity and a capacity for autonomous action apart from the child's perception of her as Mother. (53)

By contrast, Neuman offers Nancy Chodorow's feminist revisionary psychoanalytic model as another theory, which Neuman calls a "version of 'feminist family romances,'" using Marianne Hirsch's terminology (55). Chodorow, Neuman explains, "characterizes mother-daughter relations as determined by connectedness rather than castration" (55). Neuman writes:

> She [Chodorow] argues that the child's achievement of a "separation, or differentiation" productive of a fully developed subjectivity depends not only on a separation of self from other, but *also* on perception of the "subjectivity and selfhood" of the other. . . . Chodorow's understanding is more "mother-directed" than most [Hirsch's terminology], for it is generally the mother whom the child first identifies as 'not me.' . . . The girl will learn that to be feminine is to be her mother and will establish

> more fluid and "permeable ego boundaries" with her mother and a closer identification with her mother's body than does her brother (Chodorow 1979: 93). (Neuman 55)

Neuman also points out that both these psychological models paradoxically "rest on the assumption of mothers' bodies as the source not only of life but also of connection for the child who, in the biological and emotional neediness we configure as love, is bound to the mother's presence," even as they "also rest . . . on the effacement of those same mothers' bodies in the child's movement towards self-individuation" (56).

This chapter will explore the extent to which Lessing paradoxically identifies with the body of her mother (is "bound to[her] mother's presence") while at the same time, resists identification ("effaces" her mother's "body") in trying to separate from her and establish her own ego boundaries (or Lessing's "sense of an individuated 'self'").

Neuman identifies several patterns of representation common in daughters' autobiographies. Three of these patterns are apparent in Lessing's works considered here. The patterns of representation Lessing has chosen vary in degrees from negative and unredeeming, to more sympathetic portrayals of the mother, who is loosely based in each case on Lessing's own mother. First, May Quest in *Landlocked* follows the pattern of mother as an "object of revulsion" and impetus for Martha Hesse's flight; secondly, "Emily's" unnamed mother in *The Memoirs* follows most closely the pattern of "murderous mothers" or counter-idealization by the narrator. These first two patterns of Neuman's display, according to her, the autobiographer's matrophobia, and seem to me to be based more closely on the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories to which Neuman (cited earlier) refers.

By contrast, the third pattern of Neuman's, which Lessing's representation of her mother in *Under My Skin* follows, is much more ambivalent than the first two patterns. Even as she expresses the desire to escape her mother through geographical distance, she actually "incorporates her mother's life into her own" (Neuman's third pattern), displaying a contradictory desire to separate from her mother and identify with her. I would argue that this third pattern is based more closely on Chodorow's understanding of "mother-daughter relations as determined by connectedness" in which the daughter "establish[s] more fluid and 'permeable ego boundaries' with her mother" (qtd. in Neuman 55). The danger, however, as Neuman points out, of understanding ego boundaries as more fluid is that autobiographers "will associate loss of their own selfhood, loss of autonomy, with reabsorption into their mother's bodies"; and then "[a]s a consequence, the mother's body . . . is also feared as overwhelming" (55-56). In fact, Neuman notes that "at its most extreme, this [understanding] leads to the misogyny . . . in which the mother—and by extension, women—represent all that is fluid and potentially overwhelming, and in which male heroes, to avoid succumbing to this desired and feared reunion with their mothers' bodies, mutilate and kill women" (79).

Neuman elaborates:

> But where a mother is experienced both as abandoning, because she had obligations that were not focussed on her daughter, and overwhelming, because her own achievements are considerable and she demands their equal from her daughter, that daughter may use autobiography to incorporate her mother's life into her own, to devour, as it were, rather than be devoured. (60)

CANADIAN THESES

THESES CANADIENNES

DREGER, SHARON TERESA
DREAMING HERSELF WHOLE: DORIS
LESSING'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND ...

ISBN 0-612-28933-8
MQ-28933
2 of 2

At the same time that Lessing portrays her mother as a "victim" of an indifferent stepmother and an authoritarian father, she records her own "determination not to reproduce that life [of her mother's upbringing]" (Neuman 61) nor to reproduce her mother's similarly emotionless (however efficient and well-intentioned) parenting style. Despite this determination to separate herself from her mother and her mother's upbringing, I will show the ways in which Lessing seems actually to merge with her mother, Emily Maude, carrying her mother with her in the personas of "Tigger" and the "Hostess personality" to such an extent that Lessing does not always maintain her own ego boundaries.

R. D. Laing in *The Divided Self* describes this condition as a form of anxiety often observed in schizoid individuals which he labels "engulfment." He writes:

> A firm sense of one's autonomous identity is required in order that one may be related as one human being to another. Otherwise, any and every relationship threatens the individual with loss of identity. One form this takes can be called engulfment. In this, the individual dreads relatedness as such, with anyone or anything or, indeed, even with himself, because his uncertainty about the stability of his autonomy lays him open to the dread. . . [that] he will lose his autonomy and identity. . . . Engulfment is felt as a risk in being understood (thus grasped, comprehended), in being loved, or even simply in being seen. . . .
>
> To be understood correctly is to be engulfed, to be enclosed, swallowed up, eaten up, smothered, stifled in or by another person's supposed all-embracing comprehension. It is lonely and painful to be

> always misunderstood, but there is at least from this point of view a measure of safety in isolation. (44-45)

Whereas Laing here is describing an extreme form of anxiety compulsively experienced by schizoid individuals (as discussed in my first chapter), Lessing is, in Laing's terms, a "normal individual" (69); she resorts "temporarily" to schizoid defenses during times of great "stress," caused for example (as I previously argued) by the anxiety of revealing more of herself than she was comfortable with in the first volume of her autobiography. In *Under My Skin*, the first book-length work of a personal nature in which Lessing "write[s] openly from [her own] life" (Buss 5), she risked being "understood," "enclosed," "swallowed" or "eaten up" (Laing's terms) by an insatiable reading public. One explanation for Lessing's adoption of the Hostess personality in this work was her extreme anxiety caused by writing clearly within the genre of autobiography, as shown in my first chapter.

However, Neuman's third pattern "incorporating her mother's life into her own," which Lessing follows to a large extent in *Under My Skin*, offers another explanation for Lessing's anxiety: despite her desire to separate herself from her mother, Lessing also, paradoxically, fears identifying completely with her mother (akin to Laing's idea of "engulfment," described above). Neuman explains this paradox: "Daughters will speak [in autobiography about mothers' bodies] with the greatest ambivalence, for it is daughters who are caught in the contradictory position of identifying with while separating from their mothers' bodies" (76). This anxiety of Lessing's regarding identification with her mother, even as she expresses fierce determination to separate herself from her mother's body, desires, and voice, is strongest in the first volume of her autobiography. "I will *not*, I simply will *not*" (*UMS* 157;190; 201) is a phrase which Lessing continually repeats, stressing, as one of the themes of *Under My Skin*, her determination not to reproduce her mother's life.

Volume I of Lessing's autobiography ends in 1949 in Cape Town, with Lessing awaiting her departure to England—"looking forward, with never a glance behind [her] . . . . waiting for [her] future, [her] real life to begin" (*UMS* 418). Even though she closes this volume while still on the shores of Africa, waiting, she disrupts chronological time in the middle of the final chapter with an eight-page flashforward to relate "what in fact happened to Gottfried Lessing" (*UMS* 411). Lessing follows his story to England, recounting their subsequent relations in England and her one visit with him in East Germany, right up to his assassination in Africa in 1979. Volume II, *Walking in the Shade*, begins in 1949 with Lessing's arrival with her son by ship at London, with a paragraph-long flashback recounting the journey. Thus, Gottfried's story receives considerably more time and space than the story of Lessing's journey, despite her claim that after Gottfried had cut off contact with his son, "[she] did not care if [she] never saw him again . . ." (415). She continues, "—and I didn't [see him again], but it mattered very much about his son. By then I had switched off, an inner door had slammed shut, I 'didn't want to know'—a most accurate description of my state of mind" (415).

Interestingly, Lessing uses the same metaphor of the slamming door much earlier in *Under My Skin* to describe her deteriorating relations with her mother. Upon discovering her adolescent daughter's conversion to Catholicism, Emily Maude "exploded into reproaches": Lessing continues, "This [hostile reaction] marked the beginning of a rejection of my mother, like a slamming of a door" (124). Moreover, the metaphor is repeated at the end of this first volume of her autobiography, once again, in the context of "rejecting her mother," this time by escaping her "family":

> That's all over, I was thinking, that's done with, meaning the tentacles of family. I was born out of my own self—so I felt. *I didn't want to know*. I was not going home to my family, I was fleeing from it. The door had shut and that was that. (419; Lessing's italics)

Ironically, however, the door slammed at the end of *Under My Skin* is not as final as the door slammed on Gottfried Lessing; the narration of her mother's story and their future relations before her mother's death in 1957 is left open until Volume II, *Walking in the Shade*, in which the reader is "doomed," as J.M. Coetzee sees it, "to the return of the mother and a rerun of the mother-daughter quarrel" (54). I will argue that Lessing fails to outrun her mother in her flight to England because Emily Maude, in the figure of the Hostess Personality, stows away "under Lessing's skin" and makes the journey with her to England. Thus, even as Lessing appears to be following Neuman's matrophobic pattern of escape, in which the daughter overcomes her fears of becoming her mother through physical separation, unwittingly perhaps, she follows Neuman's more "ambivalent" pattern of "incorporating her mother's life into her own" (60): paradoxically separating from her mother and identifying with her at the same time.

Lessing fails to escape her mother, along with her children and Southern Rhodesia, because she carries her mother's voice with her to England, embodied, as previously mentioned, in the persona of the Hostess which "shields" and "protects" Lessing's "private self" from "becoming public property" (*UMS* 20). The Hostess accomplishes this function by being "bright, helpful, attentive, receptive to what is expected" (20), all qualities which Lessing has learned from observing and listening to her socially-accomplished and capable mother. In fact, her mother's voice seeps *Under* Lessing's *Skin* so deeply that Emily Maude becomes part of Doris Lessing, a fact which J.M. Coetzee claims Lessing acknowledges by her epigraph to *Under My Skin*:

> I've got you under my skin
>
> I've got you deep in the heart of me
>
> So deep in my heart you're really a part of me,
>
> I've got you under my skin.
>
> I've tried so not to give in . . .
>
> (Cole Porter qtd. in *UMS* iv)

Coetzee argues that the epigraph from Cole Porter places the title of the autobiography, *Under My Skin*, within a context and thereby identifies Lessing's "long dead mother" as "[the] hidden addressee of the book, the 'you' deep in Lessing's heart, under her skin. . ." (51). Although Coetzee's argument is very appealing to me, I do not agree that the inclusion of this epigraph is evidence that Lessing consciously addresses her autobiography to her mother. The excerpt from the Cole Porter song, in fact, appears twice in *Under My Skin*, certainly emphasizing its importance to the autobiography as a whole. However, its second citation (204) appears in the context of Lessing's narcissistic infatuation with her own body and the sexual excitement encouraged by the "intoxicat[ing] . . . dance music" to which "the whole world was dancing . . . often at the very same time" (204); this context problematizes Coetzee's theory that the "'you' deep in my heart" is clearly Lessing's mother. Immediately following the second Porter citation, Lessing recalls a scene in which an older man "examines [her] with a smile . . .

that holds all the regrets of an ageing lover of women," and he "pronounces, 'you have a perfect figure. But it is a pity your left breast is a third of an inch lower than the right'" (205). Rather than allowing this man's remark to penetrate and damage her "private self," Lessing immediately quips in the protective voice of the Hostess personality, "'I daresay I'll manage to live with it'" (205). This "brash, jokey" and "always ready to be a good sport" voice of Tigger is "an aspect of the Hostess" (*UMS* 89), who, as Lessing points out, acts as "a protection, a shield for [her] private self" (*UMS* 20). However, what Lessing elides, Coetzee quite rightly picks up on: "this Hostess self . . . [is] disturbingly reminiscent of her mother" (51); Lessing writes of her mother in "Impertinent Daughters": "How could she stand there, with her customary determined little smile, her brisk social manner, telling me that I was not wanted in the first place . . . (61).

Even as I agree that the Hostess personality and its prototype, Tigger, are "reminiscent of [Lessing's] mother," Lessing's views on the self and the other, as discussed by Ellen Peel, problematize Coetzee's clear distinction of Doris Lessing as the addresser, the "I," and her mother as the hidden addressee, the "you" (a separate person) in *Under My Skin*. Peel writes that Lessing "has increasingly come to challenge the very distinction between self and other. Her way of bridging the chasm between the two is to decide that no such absolute chasm exists. For her, the self is always an other, even in ordinary autobiographies" (5). Moreover, at the same time that "the self is always an other" for Lessing, even more radically, the reverse also seems to be true. As another example of Lessing's erasure of the boundaries between self and other, Peel offers

Lessing's 1985 article, a not-so-ordinary autobiography, "Autobiography (Part Two): My Mother's Life," published in *Granta*. Peel writes:

> Both essays [part one and part two] have more to do with the author's mother than with Lessing herself. The oscillations make it impossible to decide definitively whom the essays are 'about'—self or other. The oscillations may make readers uncomfortable but suit Lessing, since she perceives no absolute gap between self and other.
>
> Skepticism about the self/other split pervades Lessing's beliefs—moral, spiritual, intellectual. (6)

Therefore, I am not sure that Lessing would see her mother as a separate person, lodged "deep in her heart" and "under her skin" (as Coetzee claims), whom she addresses in her autobiography in the discursive second-person "you" in Benveniste's sense (qtd. in Lejeune 8-10); rather, I believe that Lessing merges with her mother, incorporating parts of her, embodied in Tigger and the Hostess, as parts of herself. She speaks in her mother's voice and observes herself from the outside when it is necessary to protect her private self (that part of her to which the reader "*will never get access . . . the ultimate and inviolable privacy* . . . . Me, I this feeling of me" [*UMS* 20]). Lessing's reluctance to maintain her own ego boundaries distinct from her mother's, according to Neuman, is a result of a daughter's "ambivalence" in her paradoxical struggle to "identify with while separating from [her] mother's body" (60).

Nowhere is Lessing's "ambivalence" or paradoxical separation and identification with her mother more apparent than in her "contradictory" statements, found in *Walking in the Shade*, regarding her mother's death in 1957. Lessing writes:

> In 1957 my mother died. This is what happened. Having failed to find a home with me [in England], and back in Southern Rhodesia, she stayed with this and that old friend but knew this could not be her future. She then informed my brother that she would come and live in Marandellas . . . so as to be near him. She proposed to devote her life to him and his children: 'What else am I good for, if not to be of use to others?'
>
> My mother was in a decent and comfortable retirement place. She had a little garden. Nothing wrong with these arrangements—which she made herself. But she had nothing to do. She was a vigorous seventy-three. She played bridge and whist in her afternoons and evenings—she was an excellent player—and tried to persuade herself that she was usefully occupied. Really, she was waiting for a summons from her son: 'Monica is finding everything too much; please come and live with us and take over the children.'
>
> And then she had a stroke. Into her room came the priest—she was Church of England—to administer Extreme Unction. She tried to raise herself, tried to say No, no, no—with her thickened tongue—and fell back and died. She could have lived another ten years, if anyone had needed her. (222-23)

This passage—with its description of Lessing's mother "rais[ing] herself, tr[ying] to say No, no, no" to the Catholic priest "with her thickened tongue" before falling back dead—has a melodramatic element, reminiscent of Emily Maude's "always theatrical announcements" which Lessing claims she "could not bear" (*UMS* 151). Yet at the same time, the tone of this passage is emotionally uninvolved and analytical, narrated in a voice of "detached curiosity" (12), which is that of Lessing's Hostess personality. The voice "chat[s] away, increasingly scatty, but in control" and serves as "a protection for what [goes on] within" (20). Lessing goes on to describe herself as "grief-struck" upon news of the death of her mother but in "a chilly grey semi-frozen condition—an occluded grief" (*WIS* 223). At first she feels remorse and guilt: "As usual I pitied her for her dreadful life, but this rage of pity was blocked by the cold thought: If you had let her live with you she would not have died" (223). In addition, she writes, "The emotions I could not out of honesty allow myself, like simple tears, were expressed for me in blues music" (223). She continues:

> Listening, I was thinking, At what point during this long miserable story of my mother and myself could I have behaved differently? Done differently? But I had to conclude that nothing could have been different. And if she returned to life and came to London and stood there, brave, humble, uncomprehending—'*But all I want is to be of use to others'*—then I would say, and be, exactly the same. So what use grief? Pain? Sorrow? Regrets? (224; emphasis added)

This recollection of her "occluded grief" Lessing writes from the point of view of a forty-year-old woman, a mother herself to two children from a first marriage, only a baby and a toddler when she left tnem with that marriage in 1942; she is also a single mother to a son, born in 1946 from a second marriage, whom she raised on her own after her ex-husband returned to East Germany. By abandoning her first two young children along with her marriage, Lessing unwittingly reproduces her mother's childhood experience:

"Little Emily, whose mother died when she was three, [was left] to the servants, a cold unloving stepmother, a cold dutiful father" (*WIS* 224); the difference, of course, is that Lessing leaves voluntarily and believes she is doing so for the children's own good. She writes:

> Perhaps it is not possible to abandon one's children without moral and mental contortions. But I was not exactly abandoning mine to an early death. Our house was full of concerned and loving people, and the children would be admirably looked after—much better than by me, not because I did not perform the task exactly like every other woman around me, but because of this secret doom that was inside me—and which had brought my parents to their pitiful condition. (*UMS* 263)

Similar to her "occluded grief" and "detached curiosity" over the death of her mother, Lessing describes in *Under My Skin* her "unadmitted guilt" over "abandoning" her first two children at such a young age. She writes:

> Looking back now I would say that perhaps one quarter of me had been involved since then [since leaving the family farm], and the best part of me was in cold storage. So I felt. But behind that phrase, *looking back*, what complex processes lie. 'Oh but that's how I saw things then,' an older woman may say to another . . . . And be understood at once. Well, I was uncooked.
>
> Decades later I met an elderly woman who had her first baby at the same time I had mine[. . . .] "You were not maternal," she said to me, in 1982. I looked back at all that breezy competence and could only agree.

> But between that time, in 1942, and 1946, when I had my third child, what happened that brought the buried or switched-off three-quarters into use again? I have no idea. (262; Lessing's italics and ellipses)

The above passage, like the earlier one describing Lessing's "occluded grief," suggests that the protective "shield for the private self" (*UMS* 20), the Hostess personality, loosens its grip over time, allowing her to "try to see [her] past selves as someone else might, and then [to] put [her]self back inside one of them . . . at once submerg[ing her] in a hot struggle of emotion . . ." (12). It takes Lessing another forty years after her mother's death to thaw the protective "shield" of her "grey semi-frozen condition," and "submerge" herself once again in the "hot struggle of emotion." She describes her mother's death, this time, in more personal and emotional terms:

> There are deaths that are not blows but bruises, spreading darkly, out of sight, not ever really fading. I sometimes think, Suppose she were to walk in now, an old woman, and here I am an old woman . . . how would we be? I like to think we would share some kind of humorous comprehension. Of what? Of the sheer damned awfulness of life, that's what. But most of all I think that I would simply put my arms around her. . . . Around who? Little Emily, whose mother died when she was three, leaving her to the servants, a cold unloving stepmother, a cold dutiful father. (*WIS* 224; Lessing's ellipses)

This hypothetical reaction to her resurrected mother is much warmer than her decades-earlier defensive hypothesis that even if her mother "returned to life" and "stood there, brave, humble, uncomprehending . . . . nothing [in Lessing's behavior] could have been different" (223). Furthermore, it shows a change in Lessing's ability to display emotion from her earlier choice to "express" her grief by passively listening to blues while suppressing "the emotions I could not out of honesty allow myself, like simple tears." Earlier, in *Under My Skin* Lessing describes herself as an "over-sensitive, always observant and judging, battling and impressionable, hungry-for-love-child" (26), and she criticizes her mother for not being able to display her emotions: "She talked about love often. The tenderness she had never been taught came out in worrying and fussing and—in the case of my brother making him 'delicate' so that she could nurse him; in my case, actually making me sick for a time" (26). Thus, Lessing in turn lacks the "tenderness she had never been taught" by her mother, and the result is that she, too, lacks the ability to display her emotions, apparent in her cool, controlled (Hostess-like) descriptions of her mother's death and of her decision to leave her two children from her first marriage.

Interestingly, the metaphor that Lessing uses in 1997 (from the perspective of a 78-year-old woman) to describe the impact on herself of her mother's death—"bruises, spreading darkly, out of sight, not ever really fading"—is very visceral and somatic. Furthermore, this same metaphor is used by Lessing in 1994 to describe the pain her daughter felt when she, in turn, was abandoned by her mother, thereby connecting the two events. Lessing writes:

> With Jean, a gentle soul, there was a tenderness *bruised* by [my] unadmitted guilt. I explained to them [Jean and John] that they would understand later why I had left. I was going to change this ugly world . . . . Much more, and more important: I carried, like a defective gene, a kind of doom or fatality, which would trap them as it had me, if I stayed.

> Leaving, I would break some ancient chain of repetition. One day they would thank me for it. (22; emphasis added)

The irony of the above passage is that even as Lessing claims to be leaving her children to "break some ancient chain of repetition," she ensures the continuity of that generational chain by reproducing the abandonment her mother experienced as a child. This, in turn, influenced her mother's inability to show warmth and love to her daughter; thus, Lessing misses the opportunity to create a closer and more congenial relationship with Jean than Lessing had experienced with her own mother. Moreover, Jean is Lessing's only daughter; even though Lessing later raises single-handedly her third child, Peter, and succeeds in building a more harmonious relationship with him, his gender makes the situation different, as it did for Harry, Lessing's brother, to whom her mother was able to show love and warmth. Despite her determination not to follow in her mother's footsteps, therefore, Lessing seems "doomed" to repeat some of her mother's mistakes. She is unable to escape the figurative "defective gene" inherited from her mother; the "ancient chain of repetition" remains unbroken, which she had hoped to sever by fleeing her children, her mother, and Southern Rhodesia. It seems it is up to Lessing's daughter, Jean, if she so chooses, to break the cycle with the next generation.

It is worth noting that in *Landlocked*, Lessing's autobiographical fiction, even as Martha Quest bears and abandons only one child (by her first husband, Douglas Knowell), that child, Caroline, is a daughter. This suggests to me that Lessing suffers more guilt over failing to develop a close and loving relationship with her daughter, Jean—whom she earlier described as "a gentle soul" whose "tenderness [was] bruised" (*UMS* 22) by her mother's leaving—than she feels about leaving her fiercely independent son, John. Moreover, Caroline is Martha's only child; she does not have a child with Anton Hesse, her second husband in the fictionalized version of Lessing's life story. This suggests that in her fiction, Lessing is more interested in exploring conflicted mother-daughter relations than the more harmonious relationship of mother and son, which both she and her mother experienced in life.

More importantly, in the fictionalized version, *Landlocked*, the child that we see May Quest (Martha's mother, the character loosely based on Lessing's own mother) treating with affection is a grand*daughter*; by contrast, in her autobiographies, *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade*, it is Lessing's third child, Peter, with whom Emily Maude establishes a more enduring relationship. Although Lessing reports "continual visits from [her] mother, who said that John was being ill-treated" by her "irresponsible" daughter (221) (a circumstance echoed by May Quest's unsolicited advice and concern for granddaughter, Caroline, in *A Proper Marriage*), the description of a relationship between Jean and Emily Maude is elided in *Under My Skin*. The only exception to this elision is a short paragraph in which Lessing summarizes a whooping cough episode that she and her first two children suffered: "They [Jean and John] went out to the farm where my mother nursed them, and I stayed in our [her and Frank Wisdom's] spare room . . . " (256). When Lessing goes to pick up her children, her "spectral and emaciated" father is watching them play and comments to Lessing, "Yes, that's what you were like too, such lovely little things you were and look what you turned into. It's not worth it" (256). Lessing, adopting a fictional device, apparently allows Emily Maude to respond in her own voice with direct reported speech—"'Oh come on," says my mother. . . . 'You're exaggerating'"—although she cannot resist undermining her mother's softening remarks by her own editorial comments: "[though she] surely must have had many moments of agreeing with him" (257).

By contrast, in *Landlocked* May Quest continues to see her granddaughter, Caroline, and builds a relationship with her that is closer than that which her birth-mother, Martha, is allowed and closer than the childhood relationship with her mother that Martha recalls. Lessing writes:

> Mrs. Quest's voice, with the child, had the ease of love, and Caroline's voice came confidently:
>
> 'I'd like it better if I could have Kaiser in my room, Granny.'
>
> 'Well, we'll see.'
>
> Do you suppose, Martha wondered, that when I was little she talked to me like that? Is it possible she liked me enough? (*LL* 45)

At the same time, Martha is relegated to the position of Caroline's "Aunt" by May Quest:

> Meanwhile, the little girl came into the room where Martha sat and said: 'Is grand-dad your father?'
>
> 'Yes, he is.'
>
> 'Then how can you be my auntie?'
>
> . . . Martha said nothing, watched Caroline, hopping on one foot carefully along the edge of the rug, and thought how extraordinary it was that five years before, when she had left this child, she had actually said, and believed it, meant it, felt it to be true: one day she'll thank me for setting her free. What on earth had she meant by it? How could she have

> said it, thought it, felt it? Yet, leaving the child, it had been her strongest emotion: I'm setting Caroline free.
>
> Here was Caroline, her face sharp with tension, *not* looking at Martha, having as good as asked: 'Are you my mother?' (244-45)

This passage with its string of rhetorical questions suggests to me that Lessing, through the character Martha Quest, is better able to honestly explore her guilt over leaving her infant daughter in fiction than she is in autobiography. In *Under My Skin*, by contrast (as discussed earlier), the Hostess, Lessing's "shield," her private self's "protector," remains firmly in control of the narration, even when Lessing acknowledges her "unadmitted guilt" which "bruises" little Jean's "tender" and "gentle soul" (262).

There are no rhetorical questions in the autobiographical passage which might constitute evidence of self doubt: "I was going to change this ugly world, they would live in a beautiful and perfect world where there would be no race hatred, injustice, and so forth . . . . One day they would thank me for it" (262). However, with the benefit of hindsight, Lessing's older narrating self adds: "I was absolutely sincere. There isn't much to be said for sincerity in itself" (262); thus she undermines the confident assertion of her younger experiencing self that she was leaving her children for their own good. The older voice, however, is still rational and devoid of emotion, like the voice of the capable Emily Maude in contrast to the younger, self-doubting voice of Martha Quest. Lessing, it seems, once again allows herself greater freedom in fiction than in autobiography to let down the "shield" of the Hostess, to question herself, to show doubt, and to admit her guilt, because she feels less vulnerable in this genre.

As emphasized in my introduction, Helen Buss differentiates autobiography from fiction based on the greater degree of vulnerability inherent in the autobiographical genre caused by the inclusion within the text of the autobiographical pact:

> Whether it be an event in personal history, a memoir of some significant other, or the tender life of dream or fantasy, the autobiographer offers a portion of the vulnerability of the personal self in a gesture of public testimony . . . . (6)

After all, Martha Quest is a fictional construct, however much she may resemble Doris Lessing, and perhaps this protective "mantle of fiction" (Buss 9) allows Lessing to make Martha's "personal self" more vulnerable than she is willing to make her younger experiencing self in *Under My Skin*, where, by her choice of genre, she is implicitly "attesting" to the veracity and faithfulness of her "public testimony."

Secondly, in *Landlocked*, Lessing explores in fiction the impact on Martha of watching her mother build a close relationship with her granddaughter, an opportunity which Martha is denied both with her daughter, Caroline, and her mother, May. May Quest remains cool, and at times, quite hostile to her daughter, Martha. For example:

> Mrs. Quest had taken to appropriating her grand-daughter several times a week for the day or for the afternoon. The little girl played in the big garden with her nurse while Mrs. Quest supervised from the windows of the room where Mr. Quest lay ill. And why not? Martha considered it reasonable that the Quests should have their grandchild, while she, the child's mother, who had forfeited all right to her, should be excluded. . . . All this Martha agreed to, accepted, saw the justice of. But on the

> afternoons Caroline was with her grandmother, Mrs. Quest invariably telephoned Martha to say: Caroline's here, I can see her playing near the fish-pond, she does look pretty today. Or: Be careful not to drop in, Matty, Caroline's here.
>
> And Martha said, Yes mother. No mother. And never once had she said what her appalled, and offended heart repeated over and over again. . . . You're enjoying this—you love punishing me. This is a victory for you, being free to see the child when I am not—sadistic woman, cruel sadistic woman. . . . (18; Lessing's ellipses)

Here, May Quest's "cruel" behavior to Martha is seen by Martha as unmotherly, and Martha experiences her mother, therefore, as an "object of active revulsion" (Neuman 65).

Similarly, in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, Emily's mother[36] is represented in a negative and unredeeming manner by the narrator. In *The Memoirs* the mother takes on an even darker aspect as her representation becomes, in Neuman's terms, that of a "murderous mother" (68). The example which shows best this matrophobic pattern of representation is the symbolic scene in which the narrator and Hugo watch the narrator's younger self, Emily, behind the wall in a scarlet evening dress:

> Into the room came the large tall woman, Emily's mother, and her appearance at once diminished Emily, made her smaller, so that she began to dwindle from the moment the mother stood there. Emily faced her and,

---

[36] As noted earlier, Emily and the narrator are the same character at different stages in her life. Thus, for simplicity, I will refer to the unnamed mother as "Emily's mother" rather than "Emily/narrator's mother."

> as she shrank in size acted out her provocative sex, writhing and letting her tongue protrude from her mouth. The mother gazed, horrified, full of dislike, while her daughter got smaller and smaller, was a tiny scarlet doll, with its pouting bosom, its bottom outlined from waist to knees. The little doll twisted and postured, and then vanished in a flash of red smoke, like a morality tale of the flesh and the devil. (*Memoirs* 158-59)

Here the disapproval of Emily's mother concerning her daughter's body, expressed in her "horrified [gaze] . . . of dislike," literally kills her daughter's flesh, and the daughter becomes an inanimate object: "a tiny scarlet doll" which "vanishe[s] in a flash of red smoke." R. D. Laing labels this process as "petrification" or depersonalization, describing it as an extreme form of anxiety experienced by schizoid individuals. He defines petrification: "A particular form of terror, whereby one is petrified . . . the dread, that is, of the possibility of turning or being turned, from a live person into a dead thing, into a stone, into a robot, an automaton, without personal autonomy of action, an *it* without subjectivity" (47). Indeed, Lessing's shrinking-doll passage can be read as a symbolic representation of the terrified way in which she, at times, experienced her mother since the scene occurs behind the wall in her autobiographical dream-world.

Moreover, the scene highlights the continual battle of mother and daughter concerning the daughter's body and sexuality. The impact on Emily of this experience in the fantastic or dream-world version is crippling and fatal for the daughter. As Lessing explains in *Under My Skin*, quoted in the previous chapter, in *The Memoirs* she used "the characters of [her] parents…exaggerated and enlarged" as was "appropriate for the world of dreams" (29); how much exaggeration, one wonders, is involved in Lessing's experience of her mother in this scene in *The Memoirs*, and by contrast, how much minimization is involved in the following scene from *Under My Skin*?

When Lessing returns from Granny Fisher's where she has been sent in her adolescence to convalesce, she is "confronted" by her mother in a scene which I connect to the above passage. Lessing writes:

> I returned home healthy, full of energy. I took with me a bra, made by myself. My mother, confronted by this antagonistic newly breasted young woman, switched into the fighting mode, and called, 'Michael, Michael,' and went on until he came, when she pulled up my dress to show what I had on.
>
> 'Lord, I thought it was something serious,' said [her father], going away again.
>
> I was consumed with rage and hatred, just as I had been when I began menstruating and she rushed through the house to announce it to my father and brother.
>
> Out of all proportion was my anger, my disgust at her, so strong that for years I put it out of my mind. (172)

Despite her "out-of-all-proportion" "anger" and "disgust" and her "consump[tion] with rage and hatred" towards her mother, Lessing claims to have "put [this experience] out of [her]mind," exhibiting denial much like that which a victim of sexual abuse engages in as a coping mechanism; the reader can only speculate that perhaps the shame Lessing must also have felt recurred in nightmares such as the one described in the scene from

The Memoirs. Nonetheless, Lessing in *Under My Skin*, takes on once more the persona of the Hostess, the "good sport" who knows how "to laugh at herself" (*UMS* 89), and minimizes the impact of this experience on her younger self. Further down on the same page, Lessing tries to undo the horror and disgust the reader likely feels towards Emily Maude for violating her daughter's privacy by exposing her body to her father: "It is not tactful for a mother to whip up her fifteen-year-old daughter's dress to expose her breasts to the father, but it is hardly a crime" (172). Once again, it seems Lessing is more willing to reveal the vulnerability of her character, Emily, loosely based on her own adolescent self, when hiding behind the "mantle of fiction," but she resorts to using the "shield" of the hostess to protect the vulnerability of her "private self" when writing in the autobiographical mode.

In *Under My Skin*, however, Lessing tries to understand, at least, why her mother reacts this way to her daughter's developing body. First, she offers the suggestion of a therapist with whom she became friendly in later life, who specialized in mother-daughter relationships: "It is common, said she, for mothers to be so identified with a girl-child she can hardly tell the difference between her own body and the child's" (172); Lessing defends her mother: "I am not suggesting my mother was anywhere near this level of neurosis. Yet she did handle my limbs as if they were hers, or at least her property. After all, she had been a nurse, when she had made free with the bodies of her patients" (173). In the protective voice of the Hostess, Lessing initially comes up with a rational explanation for her mother's "ma[king] free" with her daughter's "limbs."

However, she recounts another anecdote which reveals Lessing's more sympathetic attempt to understand and represent her mother's desires, apart from mothering. Lessing teaches herself to sew her own clothes and raises money for fabric by shooting and selling guineafowl to the butcher. She writes, "[My mother] raged and accused and stormed, but what she really said was, 'You are escaping me, you are leaving, and I am stuck here in this awful, miserable life of mine, and I shall never be able to get out'" (174). Here, the older-narrating self of *Under My Skin* interprets her mother's rage as jealousy over her daughter's ability to escape the life in which her mother feels she has been trapped.

Yet there seems to be more to the discomfort Lessing's mother's experiences with her daughter's budding sexuality. For example, when Lessing wears her "clever new dresses," her "mother crie[s] out that in England [Doris] would still be in the nursery, this was a horrible country if it let girls grow up at fifteen" (174). Lessing then turns her attention to her mother's sexuality and Emily Maude's relationship with Lessing's father. She writes:

> I do think the unfulfilled dreams and desires of parents affect their children. I am sure my father's frustrations affected me. That he was blocked in his sexual nature was no secret—at least to me . . . . [M]ore than once he said things to me that made his situation plain. Of course I wished he had not, although I was flattered I was his confidante. But I was too young for remarks like 'That kind of thing was left clean out of your mother.' No girl, her mother's rival, will hear this without a pang of triumph, but I was *sorry* for her, *identified with her* and so I was *in conflict*. (*UMS* 186; emphasis added)

Lessing, here, is sympathetic towards her mother who claims that "illness and tiredness . . . made sex too much for her" (186); moreover, Lessing admits the "conflict" involved for her in being her father's confidante because she "identifie[s] with her [mother]," even as she tries to separate herself from her mother by planning to enjoy her own sexual nature. Lessing writes:

> It cannot have been a help to my mother that she had nursed [my father] for months as a very ill, mutilated man.
>
> In short—but enough. Her passions went into her children, his into dreams. Dreams of love. Nightmares of war.
>
> I link this query, for it is one, with a memory. I am reading Bernard Shaw, and he says the human race is over-sexed. I must be over fourteen, for I am conscious every minute of my delicious body, that fits me like a new and longed-for dress. I am outraged. I am furious. I am threatened. Even at the time I knew my reactions were out of all proportion. I felt as if Shaw was taking away something that was my right. (187-88)

Here Lessing connects her "query," her speculations on the reasons for her parents' non-existent sex life, to her own determination to indulge her sexual nature. In this passage, she feels "outraged" and "threatened," directing her anger at Bernard Shaw (instead of at her mother) because of his accusation that Lessing, like the "human race" in general, is "oversexed." The language here—rage and fury "out of all proportion"—connects this passage to the earlier one, previously quoted, in which Lessing describes her mother's exhibition of her daughter's developing breasts to her father. Thus, I believe Lessing feels this same outrage and fury against her non-sexual mother, with whom she ambivalently "identifies," and therefore feels threatened by, but that she finds it difficult to express these fears and anger directly in autobiography. Yet in scene after scene of *Under My Skin*, confrontations show that it is her mother (not Bernard Shaw) whom adolescent Lessing fears will "take away something that [is] her right"; this feeling fuels Lessing's desire to escape her mother before she begins to identify with her mother completely, leading to "engulfment" (Laing 45), or in Neuman's terms, "incorporating her mother's life into her own" (60).

By contrast, in *Landlocked* (autobiographical fiction) and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (fictional autobiography) Lessing's point-of-view character and narrator,[37] respectively, experience very little ambivalence in their feelings about their mothers; Neither Martha nor Emily encounters difficulty in focusing on her mother as "an active object of revulsion" (Neuman 65). Martha Quest in *The Children of Violence* series succeeds in fleeing and escaping her mother. At the closing of *Landlocked*, which ends in 1949, much like the end of *Under My Skin*, Martha Quest has her citizenship back, her divorce is finished, and she is simply waiting for passage to become available on a ship to England. However, the difference between the autobiographical fiction series and Lessing's autobiography is that in *The Four-Gated City: Book Five of Children of Violence* Martha is shown to have succeeded in escaping her mother. Although her mother makes one brief visit to England to see her daughter, the disastrous visit is cut short, May Quest returns to Southern Rhodesia, and dies shortly thereafter. Their relationship had been severed beyond repair. Moreover, Martha Quest had no desire to repair the relationship.

---

[37] Whereas *The Memoirs of a Survivor* has a personified, first-person narrator, *Landlocked* is narrated in third-person, limited omniscient point of view; however, Martha, in *Landlocked* (as in all of *The Children of Violence* series), is the central consciousness or point-of-view character for the novel.

Another important difference between the autobiographical fiction and Lessing's autobiography is that with *Landlocked*, Martha Quest leaves her role of mothering behind. She does not have another child by her second marriage, whom she takes to England with her and raises as a single mother, as Lessing did. This leaves Martha Quest free to explore "madness" with Lynda Coldridge; even though Martha is a housekeeper for Mark Coldridge and surrogate mother to his children, in her role of nanny her responsibilities are not as heavy as Doris Lessing's are with her son, Peter. Thus, it seems, in her autobiographical fiction, Lessing's protagonist has managed to escape both her mother and the experience of mothering her daughter, her only child.

In *The Memoirs*, the narrator's only relationship with Emily's mother occurs behind the wall, in the dream world. On the realistic side of the wall, the mother never appears; it is the father who delivers and abandons Emily to the narrator's care since the mother cannot be bothered to perform this duty. Behind the wall the reader is shown scenes of Emily's past in which the overwhelmingly powerful mother criticizes, rages, and displays her disgust toward her daughter, culminating in the symbolic scene in which the mother "murders" her daughter, shrinking her into an inanimate miniature doll. *The Memoirs* presents the most matrophobic portrayal of the mother, loosely based on Emily Maude. In this fictional autobiography, safely protected by the "mantle of fiction," Lessing seems able to express a woman's anger towards and fear of her overwhelmingly powerful mother directly, even though the relevant scenes occur in a highly symbolic dream-world, behind the narrator's wall. However, in *The Memoirs*' redemptive ending, suggestive of Lessing's Sufist beliefs in transcendence, Emily and her lover Gerald join her officer father and "her large laughing gallant mother" (181-82), and they all follow the female Presence into "another order of world altogether" (182). This ending suggests to me that, freed by fiction, Lessing is able to imagine a reconciliation between her mother and herself, leading to a more harmonious relationship.

By contrast, in both *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade*, Lessing represents her mother more ambivalently than in her semi-autobiographical fiction. She paradoxically identifies with her mother even as she tries to separate from her, which results in Lessing's incorporation of her mother "under her skin" as embodied in the Hostess personality. Even so, in her late seventies, Lessing seems better able to separate herself from the Hostess, and to let down her guard in order to manage a reconciliation between her mother and herself, in her imagination at least: forty years after her mother's death, Lessing envisions her mother and herself meeting in the present as two "old women" who could share "some kind of humorous comprehension" of "the sheer damned awfulness of life" (*WIS* 224). I read this passage as illuminating Lessing's desire and her ability to "dream herself whole" and "unify" the "division" which she has experienced (*UMS* 297). In *Walking in the Shade*, Lessing finally seems able, through her imaginative transcendence of her life-long battle with her mother, to resolve the conflict she has experienced over the years concerning her division into "I" and "she," her private self, the observer, and its protector, the Hostess.

CONCLUSION

"I was always waking with lines of verse on my tongue," Lessing writes in *Under My Skin*. "What a pity I am not a real poet. If I were, that filter or sieve through which sounds must fall from the sea of sound to become words would be finer and subtler. I used to think, If I am going to dream sequences of words, then why not much better ones? Now this really is looking a gift horse in the mouth" (399). Despite Lessing's lack of success as a poet, about which she muses here, she has achieved considerable success with her fiction and (at least the first volume of) her autobiography.[38] As noted in my introduction, in an interview article Michele Field writes: "everything Lessing has written remains in print" (48); the one exception to Field's statement is a novel, *Retreat to Innocence* (1956), which Lessing herself suppressed, unhappy with this early novel (Driver 18).

In addition to measuring Lessing's success by the number of books she has published (not to mention the numerous reprints and translations into languages other than English), it seems more important to me that she has succeeded in healing herself, as this thesis has argued, by dreaming herself whole. First in her fictional autobiography, *The Memoirs*, and then in her autobiography, *Under My Skin*, she unifies a divided self by imagining a reconciliation with her deceased mother, the conflicted relationship with whom appears to have been a major source of anxiety for Lessing since early childhood.

---

[38] *Walking in the Shade*, Volume II of Lessing's autobiography which was recently published (October 1997) has received unfavourable reviews. For example, Candace Fertile writes: "Only a die-hard Lessing fan with an unquenchable hope for better writing would slog through the whole of Doris Lessing's second volume to her autobiography. And anyone who hasn't read the first volume (which is much more interesting and lively) will find the second confusing and elliptical" (G6).

✓

Lessing's anxiety, I have argued, manifests itself in a divided self or the development of a false-self system to protect the private self; Lessing as a child and young adult seems to have suffered from a high level of anxiety due to a "low threshold of ontological security" (Laing's term for a condition in which an individual experiences his or her identity and autonomy as always in question).[39] This childhood condition apparently resulted from Lessing's feelings of being unloved and unwanted by an emotionless mother who herself was brought up by "a cold, unloving stepmother" and "a cold, dutiful father" (*WIS* 224). The anxiety which Lessing experienced growing up triggered responses in her akin to the defences used by schizoid individuals: during times of stress, she temporarily dissociated her self and her body, attributing her actions to a personality called "Tigger" whose "personality was . . . brash, jokey, clumsy, and always ready to be a good sport, that is, to laugh at herself, apologize, clown, confess inability. An extrovert. In that it was the protection for the person I really was, 'Tigger' was an aspect of the Hostess" (*UMS* 89). As discussed in my first chapter, this personality also has a fictional counterpart, Matty, in Lessing's semi-autobiographical novel *Landlocked*, volume four of *The Children of Violence* series.

Moreover, both her autobiography (part one) and the first four volumes of her novel series can be considered *bildungsromane*, covering "the development of the hero or heroine [Lessing or Martha] from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity" (Baldick 24). During her childhood and adolescence, Lessing acknowledges that becoming a writer "was not apparent to me then." She continues, "Of course, I wasn't thinking in terms of being a writer, then—I was just thinking about how to escape. All the time" (qtd. in Field 48). Yet, by the time she leaves Southern Rhodesia for England, manuscript of *The Grass is Singing* in hand, Lessing has matured into a more secure young woman ready to pursue her own interests and make herself known as a successful writer. Thus, in both her autobiography and the fictionalized version of her life (the first four volumes of the *Children of Violence* series), Lessing sheds her respective false-self systems, Tigger and Matty, when she leaves Southern Rhodesia (and her family) in 1949 after having developed autonomy and a secure sense of identity.

---

[39] See R. D. Laing's Chapter Three, "Ontological Insecurity" in *The Divided Self* (39-61).

However, Lessing, writing her first book-length autobiographical work in 1994, resorts once again to her childhood behaviour which she seemed to have outgrown. In *Under My Skin* she adopts a false-self system (the Hostess personality) in order to "shield" and "protect" her "private self," the observer, "Me, I, this feeling of me. The observer, never to be touched, tasted, felt, seen, by anyone else" (*UMS* 20). Furthermore, Lessing connects the two personalities, "Tigger" and the "Hostess" when she acknowledges that "'Tigger' was an aspect of the Hostess" (*UMS* 89) "in that it [the Tigger personality] was the protection for the person I really was" (89).

In summary, I have given two possible reasons for Lessing's adoption of these false-self systems. In the case of the Tigger personality and its fictional counterpart, Matty, the first explanation seems most reasonable: that a low level of ontological security leads the child/adolescent Doris or Martha to dissociate her mind and body; her "private self" remains an "unembodied self, [which acts as an] onlooker at all the body [Tigger or Matty] does, engag[ing] in nothing directly. Its functions come to be observation, control, and criticism" (Laing 59).

By contrast, adoption of the Hostess personality seems to have been triggered by the anxiety Lessing experiences due to the vulnerability of writing for the first time a book-length work clearly within the genre of autobiography. The reader will recall that, as Helen Buss writes, "the autobiographer offers a portion of the vulnerability of the personal self in a gesture of public testimony in order to facilitate some communal therapeutic purpose, to effect some change, some healing, some new way of being in the world" (6). Buss here brings our attention back to the therapeutic role of autobiography. Indeed for Lessing, the process of writing *Under My Skin* and her attempts to understand her own behaviour, as well as why her mother behaved the way she did towards her daughter, seem to have led to a "therapeutic purpose," "some healing" for Lessing. And, given Buss's understanding of the "empowered" reader (14) made possible by the "lovely intimacy between writer and reader that fiction denies" (15), readers can then take Lessing's personal "insights" into their own lives, "making [their] own meaningful stor[ies] as [they] read" (14); in this way, Lessing's autobiography can "effect some change, some healing, some new way of being in the world" for her reading community.

In her late seventies, writing *Walking in the Shade*, Lessing, having moved toward a more empathetic and forgiving attitude toward her mother, seems better able to separate herself from the Hostess, and to let down her protective "shield" in order to manage a reconciliation between her mother and herself, in her imagination at least. Midway through the second volume of her autobiography, Lessing visualizes her mother and herself meeting again (forty years after her mother's death) as two "old women" who could share "some kind of humorous comprehension" of "the sheer damned awfulness of life" (*WIS* 224).

Moreover, this imaginary but therapeutic reconciliation in Lessing's autobiography was preceded by a redemptive ending in Lessing's earlier fictional autobiography, *The Memoirs of a Survivor: An Attempt at Autobiography.* In an act of transcendence at the end of *The Memoirs*, Lessing's fictional counterpart, divided between the unnamed narrator and her younger self , Emily, "dreams herself whole" (*UMS* 297) when she imagines herself in "another order of world altogether" (182), rejoined with her mother who has been transformed into a "large laughing gallant mother" (181-82).

Consequently, it seems Lessing first teaches herself in a fictional autobiography how to unify her self-division; then, she relapses back into a divided self once more in Volume I of her autobiography (brought on, I have suggested, by the insecurity which results from her loss of the protective "mantle of fiction"); and finally, in accordance with Marlatt's idea of fictionalysis (discussed earlier), Lessing uses her "energetic imagination," in *Walking in the Shade*, to "weave for [her]sel[f] the cloth of [her] life as [she] wants it to be" (Marlatt 17): she imagines a reconciliation with her deceased mother and heals herself of her life-long emotional pain over the conflicted relationship they had experienced.

Works Cited

Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Sixth Edition. Fort Worth: Harcourt, Brace, 1993.

Baldick, Chris. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991.

Bergland, Betty. "Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject: Reconstructing the 'Other.'" *Autobiography & Postmodernism*. Ed. Kathleen Ashley, et. al. Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1994. 130-66

Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. Fourth edition. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

Buss, Helen. "Writing and Reading Autobiographically." *Prairie Fire* 16.3 (Life Writing Special Issue, Autumn 1995): 5-15.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Cederstrom, Lorelei. *Fine-Tuning the Feminine Psyche: Jungian Patterns in the Novels of Doris Lessing*. New York: Peter Lang, 1990.

Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1979.

Coetzee, J.M. "The Heart of Me." Rev. of *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949*, by Doris Lessing. *New York Review of Books* 41.21 22 Dec. 1994: 51-54.

Davidson, Basil. "She had a farm in Africa." Rev. of *Under My Skin*, by Doris Lessing. *The Spectator* 22 Oct. 1994: 48.

Daymond, M.J. "Areas of the Mind: *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and Doris Lessing's African Stories. *Ariel* 17.3 (July 1986): 65-82.

Dillard, Annie. "To Fashion a Text." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir.* Ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. 41-59.

Draine, Betsy. "Changing Frames: Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor.*" *Studies in the Novel* 11.1 (Spring 1979): 51-62.

Driver, C. J. "Profile 8: Doris Lessing." *The New Review* 1.8 (Nov. 1974): 17-23.

Duyfhuizen, Bernard. "On the Writing of Future-History: Beginning the Ending in Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor.*" *Modern Fiction Studies* 26 (1980): 147-56.

Fahim, Shadia S. *Doris Lessing: Sufi Equilibrium and the Form of the Novel.* New York: St. Martin's, 1994.

Fertile, Candace. Rev. of *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography, 1949-1962*, by Doris Lessing. *Edmonton Journal* 16 Nov. 1997: G6.

Field, Michele. "Doris Lessing: 'Why Do We Remember?'" Interview article. *Publisher's Weekly* 19 Sept. 1994: 47-48.

Greene, Gayle. "Doris Lessing's *Landlocked*: A New Kind of Knowledge." *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change.* Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1994.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.

Knapp, Mona. *Doris Lessing.* New York: Frederick Ungar, 1984.

Kuns, Guido. "Apocalypse and Utopia in Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor.* *International Fiction Review* 7.1 (Winter 1980): 79-84.

Laing, R. D. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness.* 1959; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965.

---. *The Politics of Experience.* New York: Pantheon-Random, 1967.

Laing, R. D., and Aaron Esterson *Sanity, Madness, and Family: Families of Schizophrenics.* Vol. 1. 1964; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973.

Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography.* Ed. Paul John Eakin. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989.

Lessing, Doris "Autobiography (Part One): Impertinent Daughters." *Granta* 14 (Winter 184): 52-67.

---. "Autobiography (Part Two): My Mother's Life." *Granta* 17 (Autumn 1985): 226-38.

---. *The Diaries of Jane Somers.* New York: Vintage Books, 1984.

---. *The Four-Gated City.* 1969. London: Granada, 1983.

---. *Going Home.* 1957. London: Granada, 1968.

---. *The Golden Notebook.* 1962. London: Flamingo, 1993.

---. Interview with Eleanor Wachtel. *Writers & Company.* 1991. Audiocassette. Toronto: CBC RadioWorks, 1995.

---. *Landlocked.* 1965. St. Albans, Herts: Panther-Granada, 1973.

---. *The Memoirs of a Survivor.* 1974. Toronto: Stoddart, 1991.

---. *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949.* 1994. New York: Harper Perennial, 1995.

---. *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography 1949 to 1962.* New York: Harper Collins, 1997.

Mantel, Hilary. "Pointing Out the Defects." Rev. of *Under My Skin*, by Doris Lessing. *London Review of Books.* 22 Dec. 1994: 23-24.

Marlatt, Daphne. "Self-Representation and Fictionalysis." *Tessera* 8 (Special edition: Auto-graph(e), Spring 1990): 13-17.

Neuman, Shirley. "'Your Past… Your Future': Autobiography and Mothers' Bodies." *Genre, Trope, Gender: Critical Essays by Northrop Frye, Linda Hutcheon, and Shirley Neuman.* Ed. Barry Rutland. Ottawa: Carleton UP, 1992. 53-86.

Peel, Ellen. "The Self is Always an Other: Going the Long Way Home to Autobiography." *Twentieth Century Literature* 35.1 (1989 Spring): 1-6.

Pickering, Jean. *Understanding Doris Lessing.* Colombia: U of South Carolina P, 1990.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics.* 1983. London: Routledge, 1993.

Rose, Ellen Cronan. Rev. *of Under My Skin: Volume One of my Autobiography, to 1949, by Doris Lessing. Women's Review of Books* 12.6 (March 1995): 11-12.

Rowe, Margaret Moan. *Doris Lessing*. Women Writer's Series. Houndmills: MacMillan, 1994.

Rubenstein, Roberta. "An Evening at the 92nd Street Y," *Doris Lessing Newsletter* 2 (1984): 6.

---. *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness.* Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979.

Smith, Sidonie. *Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century.* Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1993.

Sproxton, Birk. "Kate Rice: Her Diary." *Prairie Fire* 16.3 (Life Writing Issue, Autumn 1995): 149-59.

Storr, Anthony, comp. *The Essential Jung*. New York: MJF Books, 1983.

Vlastos, Marion. "Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Psychopolitics and Prophecy." *PMLA* 91.2 (March 1976): 245-58.

Zinsser, William, Ed. "Introduction." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.